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INSIDE PHILIPS' FLATSCREEN PLANS → MERIDIAN REVAMPS HI-RES AUDIO
→ PIONEER ATMOS SPEAKERS → READER'S CINEMA ROOM → POLK SUB/SAT 5.1

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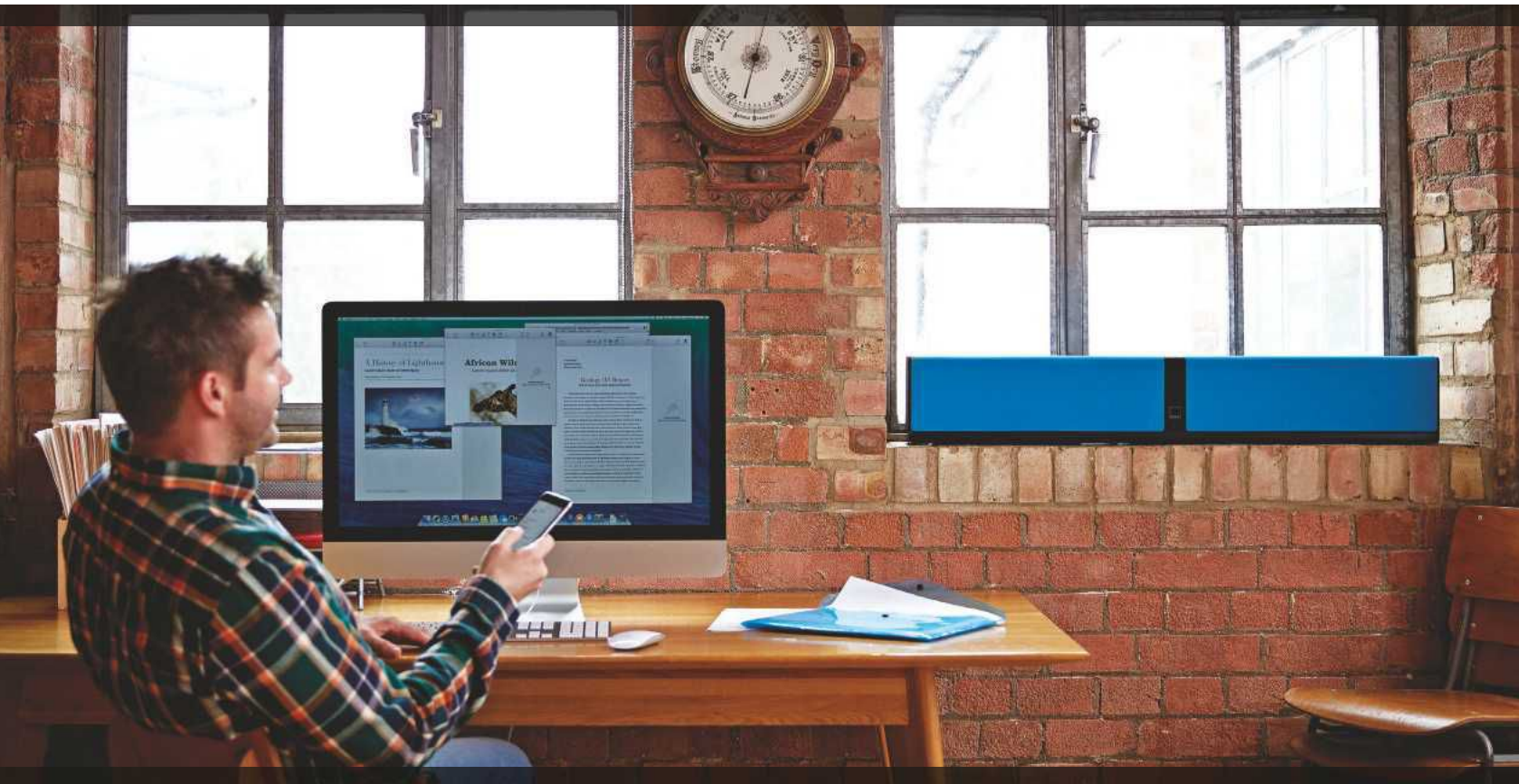




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We check out another reader's room, p82

WELCOME

During January it's hard to escape a newspaper article or TV report explaining how the whole of the country is in a foul mood because we've run up a huge credit card debt over Christmas, and haven't seen sunshine in two months. But I quite like this dark, cold month, as it's when Hollywood dumps movies in cinemas that it can't find time for anywhere else, away from the Christmas blockbusters, Spring/Summer tentpole season and Autumn Oscar-hopefuls run.



This time the January slate includes *Taken 3*. Yet unfortunately the studio (Fox) has cut the latest Liam Neeson fight-fest to get a 12A rating in the UK. So I am in a foul mood after all. **Isn't enough money made from the rest of the year's tween-friendly popcorn flicks** to allow for the occasional 18-rated adventure? Apparently not. At least I can enjoy the original *Taken* on Blu-ray in its unedited glory – and I'll be keeping an eye out for a different cut of *Taken 3* later this year.

Mark Craven
Editor



MENU



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The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



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The UK's foremost expert in extreme audio writes about bass, hi-fi and, er, cartoons



Adrian Justins:
Made his name as the editor of *What Video & TV* and *What Home Cinema*

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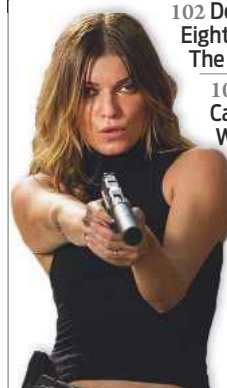
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Banshee: The second season of the fast-paced US TV series arrives on BD, p99

JVC

OUR PROJECTION OF THE FUTURE



4K
e-shift3

Lift your viewing experience to new heights with the latest 2014 range of 3D enabled D-ILA Projectors from JVC.* Featuring an industry leading native contrast ratio of 150,000:1 and a dynamic contrast ratio of 1,500,000:1.**

Not only is the range designed for ultra-high 4K resolution and is 60p ready. It also has the new JVC e-Shift 3 technology, this means it can shift sub-frames to achieve 4 times the pixel density of the original

content, bringing you an even greater level of definition.

Now in it's sixth generation, our D-ILA Projectors have always set new standards. Capable of delivering images of advanced quality with extreme realism and presence in your home cinema environment.

But after all seeing is believing, so to arrange a product demonstration email hdworld@jvc.co.uk
Or for more information visit: www.jvc.co.uk

DLA-X500R has been awarded:



DLA-X700R has been awarded:



* The 2014 range of JVC D-ILA Projectors consists of model numbers DLA-X900R, DLA-X700R, DLA-X500R. Visit www.jvc.co.uk for more details. ** Contrast ratio specifications are for the DLA-X900R. 3840x2160 (4K e-shift3 – not native 4K).

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BULLETIN

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 LINSAR TV brand makes Roku its default Smart solution **INSIDE OUT LONDON** Pro installers embrace 4K
 MERIDIAN Re-writing the hi-res audio rulebook **NEWS X10** The hottest news stories in bite-size chunks
 TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES The heroes in a half-shell hit DVD and Blu-ray **AND MUCH MORE!**

Atmospheric audio

Pioneer Dolby Atmos-enabled speakers → www.pioneer.co.uk



With Dolby Atmos Blu-rays finally seeing the light of day, Pioneer has decided that the time is right to introduce a new family of speakers to partner its Atmos-compatible LX range of AVRs. In addition to front-firing arrays, the new S-BS73A-LR bookshelf (£599 p/p) and S-FS73A floorstander (£599 each) feature upward-firing drive units to reflect sound off your ceiling and provide the additional height information. The range also includes the new S-C73A centre speaker (£349).

HCC ONLINE...

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One-stop system

DALI Kubik One → www.dali-uk.co.uk



DALI has expanded its Kubik lineup with the debut of the Kubik One. This stylish £800 all-in-one audio system uses an extruded aluminium chassis (for improved cabinet rigidity and reduced resonance) and the company's Wide Dispersion drivers, including two 5.25in wood/fibre cones and a brace of 1in soft dome tweeters. Amp power is rated at 100W, and the Kubik One is designed to function both as a soundbar (via its optical audio inputs) or as a music solution – aptX Bluetooth is joined by USB, stereo phono and 3.5mm inputs.

Double bass base



Brit brand Cambridge Audio is celebrating the New Year with the release of a new £280 soundbase. The TV5 offers a step-up in size and sonic prowess over the earlier TV2, with its larger cabinet accommodating a second down-firing 6.5in subwoofer. Otherwise, the specifications are essentially the same as they were for the TV2 – including a 100W digital amplifier, two 2.25in BMR (Balanced Mode Radiator) drivers and support for aptX Bluetooth streaming. www.cambridgeaudio.com

Next-gen 3D spex



Optoma has unveiled two new lines of 3D glasses. The ZF2300 are priced at £80 per pair (or £90 for a starter kit including the transmitter) and will sync with any Optoma Full 3D projector with a 3D-sync port using an RF signal. The £70 ZD302 glasses (pictured) are compatible with all of the brand's 3D Ready and Full 3D PJs (except the HD90 and HD91) and utilise DLP Link tech to automatically sync with onscreen images. Both pairs of spex promise improved battery life and support for 96/100/120/144Hz refresh rates. www.optoma.co.uk

Premium 'phones



High-end audio brand McIntosh Laboratory's first ever headphones have arrived in the UK. The £2,000 MHP1000 cans employ three-layer 40mm drivers in a circumaural, closed-back design, claiming a frequency response of 5Hz-20kHz. The 'phones ship with two detachable cables with gold-plated custom-made connectors – a 1m lead with a 3.5mm jack and a 3m cable with a 6.3mm (0.25in) jack – and have their earpads and headband dressed in 'premium' natural soft leather. www.mcintoshlabs.com

Linsar adds Roku to its TVs

UK flatscreen marque also confirms 4K/UHD models are on the way

Independent British TV manufacturer Linsar has confirmed that it will introduce its first TVs with integrated Roku streaming, plus competitively priced 42in and 50in 4K screens this year.

Currently, the Dorset-based brand offers buyers of TVs measuring 32ins and up a Roku Streaming Stick free of charge, but Director Terry Reed told *HCC* that this was just the start of an ongoing relationship with the media giant. 'We intend to make Roku our default Smart solution,' he says. 'The beauty is that Roku offers all the main catch-up TV services, plus Now TV, and it's customisable. And with a plug-in device, if something goes wrong, it's easily fixed.'

Ultimately, Linsar aims to produce screens with Roku embedded. 'By the middle to end of the year, we'll have Roku functionality built into our board. On the core range we'll probably use an MHL version of the Roku platform. It's a good collaboration. They're a good solid partner with great financial backing, they're not going to disappear...'



Terry Reed: 'We've got the option to do curved TVs but currently we don't see the benefit. It's the emperor's new clothing.'

The company is also prepping its first 2,160p 4K/Ultra HD screens. 'By the back end of January, the chipset for the HEVC codec and HDCP 2.2 will become commercially available. We've already got early samples and they're gorgeous to look at. They're extremely well built and the feature set is second-to-none.'

Keeping it flat

Apparently Linsar has an eye on the higher-end market, too. 'As we go through the year we intend to go bigger; we're looking at 60in, 65in and 70in screen sizes,' confides Reed. 'There's a beautiful 80in product we're working on as well.' Just don't expect Linsar to go curved, though. 'We've spent years getting TV flat. We're definitely not looking to go curved. It's not on our roadmap. We've got the option to do it but currently we don't see the benefit. It's the emperor's new clothing.'

And in the far distance, says Reed, is OLED. 'I really like what I've seen, but it's unlikely to come from us until the end of 2016.'

Currently the brand has a rather more modest hit on its books with the X-24-DVD, a £300 24in TV with stylized forward-facing speakers, integrated DVD player and Bluetooth connectivity. When users stream audio from a Bluetooth device the screen blanks. A second iteration of the screen, without DVD player, will be introduced in the coming months.



PLAYLIST...

Team *HCC* spins up its disc picks of the month

Guardians of the Galaxy (All-region BD)

Marvel Studios' *annus mirabilis* comes to a fitting end with a magnificent hi-def platter for this imaginative and witty space opera



Transformers: Age of Extinction (All-region BD)



The Dolby Atmos mix on Michael Bay's latest giant robot slugfest is a startling introduction to the new audio format

Alien: Isolation (PS4/PS4/X360/XOne/PC)



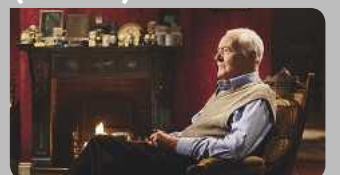
Boosting the difficulty to its hardest setting has given this brilliant game another lease of life. Hiding under tables has never been so much fun

Girls: Season Three (All-region BD)



Another season of HBO's audacious comedy-drama receives the usual top-class treatment on Blu-ray

Will and Testament (R2 DVD)



Restore your faith in politicians with this brilliant documentary charting the life and career of Tony Benn

EXTRAS...

Small items that could make a big impression

75 Years of Marvel



Taschen celebrates the 75th anniversary of Marvel Comics in spectacular style with this hulk-sized book.

The £135 price tag gets you more than 2,000 pieces of over-sized comic art accompanied by essays charting all the major eras and milestones in the company's history. The tome also includes a four-foot fold-out Marvel timeline!

Osram LEDstixx



This £10 slim-line LED light

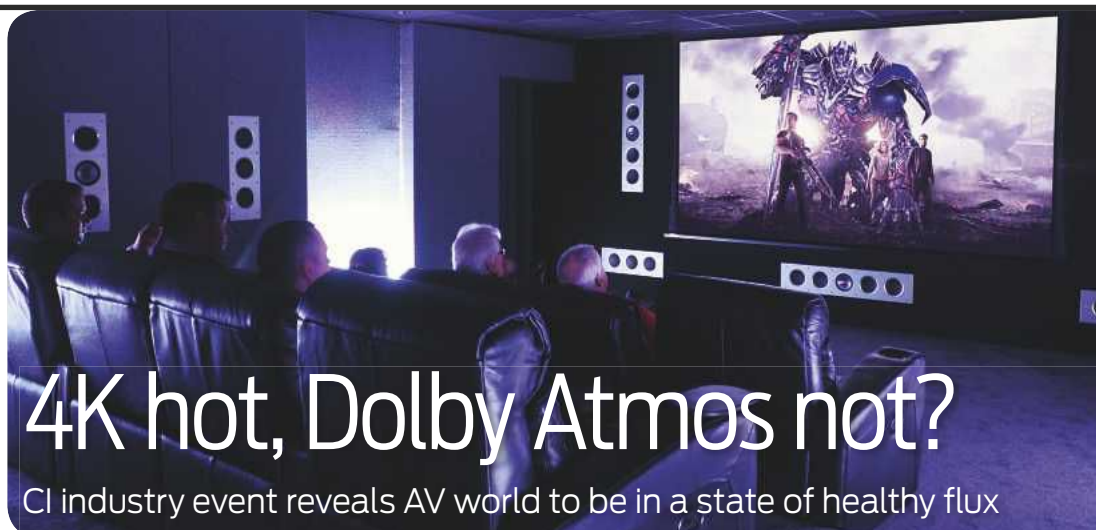
stick (both wall-mountable and free-standing) is perfect for adding a touch of bling to your setup, whether it's illuminating your disc shelf or throwing some dramatic light on your floorstanders. Rated to last 25,000 hours.

Game of Thrones: Weirwood Snow Globe



Limited to just 1,200 pieces, this collectible snow globe features a finely detailed replica of a weirwood tree

from HBO's popular fantasy series. The piece stands 6.5in tall, while the glass globe has a diameter of 4.75in, and it can be yours for £86 from www.hboshopeco.com.



4K hot, Dolby Atmos not?

CI industry event reveals AV world to be in a state of healthy flux

4K and Dolby Atmos dominated discussions at the recent custom install industry confab Inside Out London. The meeting, which brought together the UK's leading smart home installers and specialist manufacturers, proved a talking shop for technologies and trends. The good news is that dedicated home cinema appears to be staging a comeback despite the rising tide of soundbars and simplified TV audio systems.

While custom installers no longer need to be sold the benefits of largescreen 4K/UHD, potential complications surrounding the implementation of HDCP 2.2 copy protection remain a cause for concern. Hamish Neale, director of sales and marketing at 4K signal distribution manufacturer Leaf Europe, told *HCC* that it was 'increasingly important for installers to specify HDCP 2.2 compliant products within the new 4K/Ultra HD ecosystem.' The catch is that the silicon required for this is only now starting to become available to equipment manufacturers.

Interestingly, while professional cinema rooms look increasingly likely to be specified for Dolby Atmos, and even Auro-3D, it seems mainstream consumers are not asking for it by name. 'There's great awareness for 4K/Ultra HD. People are requesting 4K displays without prompting,' Simon Gregory, director at Cinema Rooms told *HCC*. 'However, the same cannot be said for Atmos!'



Stuart Tickle: 'There's a good market for über-expensive custom installs, but most are now around the £20K-£30K mark'

Even so, leading CI distributor AWE is predicting fast-rising demand for Dolby Atmos-enabled receivers. So much so that it has installed an Atmos theatre in its Surrey HQ (pictured). 'There's a good market for über-expensive home cinemas, but the majority of custom installations are now around the £20K-£30K mark,' MD Stuart Tickle told us. 'So what we've put together is a Dolby Atmos cinema featuring a Denon AVR and Marantz power amp combination, Epson projector and KEF custom-install specific in-wall speakers.'

The explosion of interest in low-cost AV installs has even prompted industry body CEDIA to create a new category in its annual trade awards in 2015 – Best Media Room under £10,000.

If the scuttlebutt at Inside Out London is to be believed, home cinema and smart home installations are also shrinking – at least when it comes to budgets. Control systems that were once the preserve of home automation giants like AMX and Crestron can now be rivalled using apps and iPads. Adam Whistler, business development manager at Fibaro, told *HCC* that his company was now struggling to keep up with demand. 'We're having to expand rapidly as a result,' he beamed.

Classé introduces entry-level line-up

Sigma family includes two power amplifiers and a 7.1-channel processor/pre-amp

Unrivalled performance at a more affordable price is the credo behind the latest range of separates from high-end manufacturer Classé. Its newly unveiled Sigma range kicks off with the £3,000 AMP2 and £4,300 AMP5 amplifiers, plus the £4,300 SSP home cinema processor/pre-amp.

The 2 x 200W AMP2 and 5 x 500W AMP5 are based around a Class D power plant and share the same topography, with both utilising switching technologies in their power supply and amp stages originally developed for the Delta series CA-D200. The company also promises that its revised controller circuitry improves audio quality by

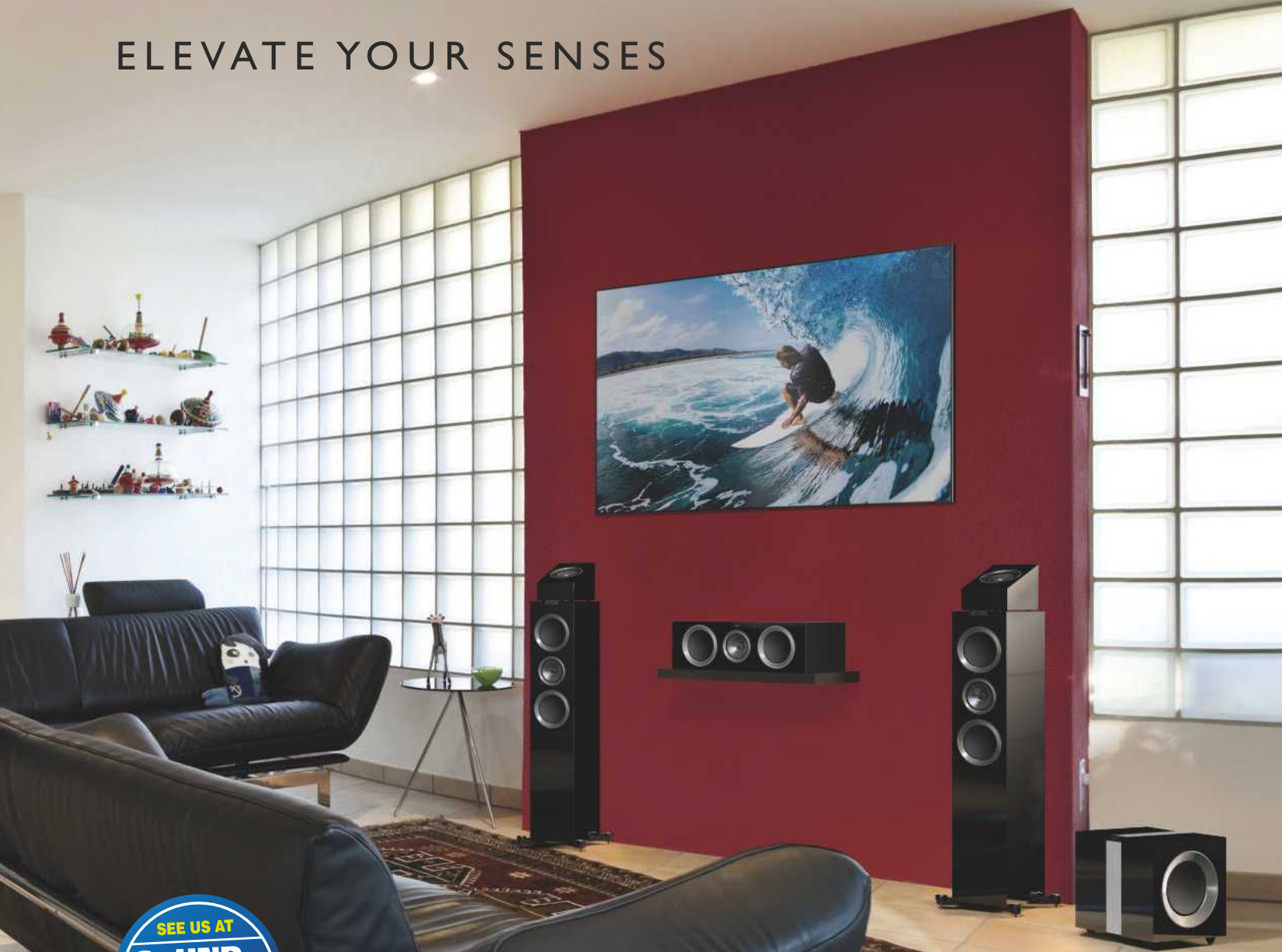
minimising 'dead-band time,' a switching distortion issue that affects Class D amps.

Promising to be just as adept with surround sound as stereo sources, the new 7.1-channel SSP processor (pictured) offers proprietary signal clocking for DLNA and AirPlay, plus a 24-bit/192kHz asynchronous USB two-way path. The video board and DSP have also been designed to be fully upgradable.



The 7.1-channel Sigma SSP pre-amp/processor offers Classé quality at a more affordable price

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R SERIES

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DIARY

Our calendar ensures that you don't miss out...

→ JANUARY

23: Ex Machina

28 Days Later and Dredd writer Alex Garland makes his directorial debut with this techie sci-fi thriller about a female artificial intelligence. See the line between man and machine blur when the film opens at UK cinemas. www.universalpictures.co.uk

26: The Equalizer

Denzel Washington stars in this bigscreen update of the popular 1980s TV series starring Edward Woodward. Pick it up on DVD and BD from today. www.sonypictures.co.uk



29: Kingsman: The Secret Service

Matthew (Kick-Ass) Vaughn brings yet another Mark Millar comic to UK cinemas

with this comedic actioner about a straight-laced secret agent and his rebellious young protégé. www.fox.co.uk

30: Big Hero 6

Almost three months after it hit US theatres, Disney's latest animated blockbuster finally arrives on these shores. Hopefully it will have been worth the ridiculously long wait... www.disney.co.uk

→ FEBRUARY

02: Rabid

David Cronenberg's second feature makes its way to Blu-ray courtesy of Arrow Films. And unlike the earlier Shivers Blu-ray, we've been assured that this disc will be uncut. www.arrowfilms.co.uk

06: Jupiter Ascending



Originally due for release last July, the Wachowskis' space opera starring Mila Kunis and Channing Tatum was delayed until today to enable special effects work to be completed. So it should look spectacular! www.warnerbros.co.uk

10: Integrated Systems Europe

Amsterdam's RAI convention centre hosts the annual three-day trade show dedicated to professional AV and smart tech integration. www.iseurope.org

12: HCC #244

The next issue of your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and in-depth software reviews. www.homecinemachoice.com

Rewriting the hi-res rulebook

Meridian's hyper-efficient lossless codec offers unprecedented quality

Meridian Audio says it will rewrite the rulebook when it comes to high-resolution audio with the introduction of a new lossless 'encapsulation' technology called MQA (Master Quality Authenticated). Existing audio codecs consume increasingly more space as they bloat with resolution. Miraculously, MQA doesn't.

Meridian founder Bob Stuart describes MQA as a 'lateral shift in coding.' The problem with ever higher sample rates, he says, is that files sizes become commensurately larger simply to deliver 'nuances' of improvement. 'MQA allows the sound of the studio to be captured at much lower rates, and lets users experience every intricate detail that the microphone originally heard.' MQA can be streamed at just 1Mb per second, or wrapped in FLAC or ALAC containers for download and playback.

Demonstrations of MQA, from monophonic '60s Bob Dylan to stereo '70s Roberta Flack, displayed an astonishing freshness. The tracks recreated the ambiance of the recording studio, the proximity of the singers to the microphone. 'This has never been experienced before,' says Stuart. 'What we can do now is unleash original recordings from the archives with a fidelity that's never been heard.'

Stuart confided that the technology could only have been developed following recent advances in MRI scanning and related fields. 'Research shows that humans are between two and five times more sensitive to time than they are to frequency, and this is critical,' he reveals. He also confirmed that MQA can be used with multichannel content. 'It doesn't matter how many channels you encode.'



Bob Stuart: 'What we can do now is unleash recordings from the archives with a fidelity that's never been heard'

The English AV manufacturer has already introduced the MQA-compatible £200 Explorer 2 USB DAC, even though there is no

software currently available to enjoy. Equipment manufacturers say they are looking to fast-track network players that utilise hardware encoding. David Mugford, UK sales manager for Onkyo Europe, says his company is already working on MQA-compatible equipment. 'We first heard MQA some time ago, and it's awesome,' he enthuses. Arcam MD Charlie Brennan has also confirmed support for the tech. 'We'll be looking to have a product ready for launch during the Summer of 2015,' he told HCC.

This support is crucial for Meridian, as it seeks to avoid MQA suffering a similar fate to DVD-Audio.

Creative opportunities

'What we're excited about in addition to the quality of the sound is the introduction of MQA as a platform for product development for a very long time,' reveals Mike Jbar, CEO of the Warner Music Group. 'Many of the things that have been developed by Meridian here will allow artists to innovate with the experiences they create for fans. Our primary responsibility is to help artists communicate to their fans effectively. This is an opportunity for the industry to return to offering quality as well as convenience.'

Intriguingly, there seems to be more to the new technology than just highly efficient encoding. Jbar hints at 'environmentally specific products and experiences,' and comments: 'It could be argued that we've been stagnant as an industry when it comes to introducing new experiences. There's nothing better than introducing this kind of technology to the creative community, because they'll do wonderful things with it.'



Meridian has already launched the £200 Explorer 2 MQA-compatible USB DAC

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 Interview cancelled

Sony Pictures has announced that it now has no plans to release its film *The Interview* (which imagines the assassination of North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un) in cinemas, following terror threats from a hacking group called Guardians of Peace. The Seth Rogen/James Franco comedy was due to arrive in UK cinemas on February 6. A VOD release could still be in the offing.

2 Whoops!

In a recent review, we stated that Sony's BDP-S6200 Blu-ray player couldn't play Super Audio CDs. We've now been alerted that it can spin these hi-res discs after a firmware upgrade. Which makes it even more of a bargain.

3 Amazon adds 4K to Prime

Amazon's Prime Instant Video is the latest online streaming service to offer 4K Ultra HD content – albeit only in the US for now. The films available at present all appear to come from Sony Pictures and include *American Hustle*, *Elysium*, *The Mask of Zorro*, *This is the End*, *The Amazing Spider-Man* and its sequel.

4 Now TV opens Windows

Sky has added Windows 8.1 support to its Now TV streaming service, bringing the total number of compatible devices in its eco-system to 60. The Now TV app can be found in the Windows Store to download and provides subscription access to movies, all seven Sky Sports channels and 13 entertainment channels including Sky Atlantic, Fox, ITV Encore, ABC and Comedy Central.

5 UK TV numbers drop

The latest research published by regulatory body Ofcom has revealed that the number of UK households that has a television dropped for the first time since the 1950s. After decades of growth, the number of households fell from 26.33 million to 26.02 million over the course of 2013, with more people using devices such as tablets, smartphones and laptops to get their televisual fixes.

6 Freeview gets connected

The next generation of Freeview took a step closer to reality with the news that Digital UK has contracted DTG Testing to develop a test suite for Freeview Connect set-top boxes. This updated version of the free TV platform will integrate conventional TV broadcasts with internet-delivered IPTV channels and catch-up services.

7 Expanding exhibition

The annual Integrated Systems Europe trade show is set to expand into a four-day event from 2016 onwards. ISE Managing Director Mike Blackman claims that the decision to add an extra day has been driven by 'extremely high attendance' and requests from exhibitors 'to have more time to spend with attendees.' The show will continue to be held at the Amsterdam RAI, and the 2015 incarnation kicks off on February 10.

8 Sonos update

Sonos has rolled out a new software update allowing users to add up to 32 accounts for music services to their Sonos setup, and promising improved search functionality in the iOS app. The v5.2 software also claims to update the EQ and volume balance on the brand's Playbar soundbar.

9 Smart TV is child's play

South Korean telly maker Samsung has partnered with Hopster to bring 'safe and ad-free' content aimed at preschool children to the Samsung Smart Hub. The Hopster TV App is touted as a one-of-a-kind, ad-free subscription service hosting hundreds of episodes of award-winning TV shows including *Bob the Builder*, *Paddington Bear*, *Angelina Ballerina* and *Pingu*.

10 Let it go, let it go...

It seems there's no stopping Disney's *Frozen*. In the run up to Christmas the animated juggernaut passed the 3.5 million disc sales barrier in the UK, becoming only the third film to do so this decade (the others being *Avatar* and *Skyfall*). It's now Blighty's 15th biggest-selling DVD and Blu-ray ever.



Soon there'll be no escaping that flipping song...

PREMIERE

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

Strange casting

Marvel Studios has officially announced the casting of Benedict Cumberbatch as 'sorcerer supreme' Doctor Strange in the comic book adaptation of the same name, due in cinemas in November 2016.

Ghosts of 007's past



The title of the 24th Bond film has been revealed and it has some pretty obvious links back to the golden age of the franchise. *Spectre* will premiere in UK cinemas on October 23, with Daniel Craig being joined on screen by Christoph Waltz, Léa Seydoux, Monica Bellucci and Naomie Harris.

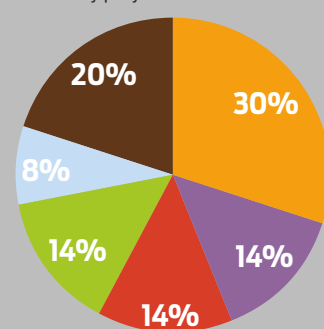
Blue steel returns!

It appears that the long-rumoured *Zoolander* sequel is finally moving forward with the news that Penelope Cruz has signed on to the comedy. The actress will be joining returning stars Ben Stiller, Owen Wilson and Will Ferrell, while *Tropic Thunder* writer Justin Theroux will be directing from his own script.

WE ASKED...

Which part of your system are you hoping to upgrade/replace next?

■ Television
 ■ Speakers
 ■ Projector
 ■ AV receiver
 ■ Blu-ray player
 ■ None of it



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Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles → Paramount → All-region BD & R2 DVD



Get ready for a 'turtley' awesome home cinema experience worth 'shelling' out for [please stop – Ed] when the Michael Bay-produced reboot of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* blasts its way onto DVD, Blu-ray and 3D Blu-ray from February 16. In addition to eye-popping 2.40:1-framed 1080p visuals and plenty of bonus features (including behind-the-scenes featurettes and an extended ending) the two Blu-ray platters should deliver some impressive sonics thanks to the inclusion of a Dolby Atmos soundtrack.

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The future's bright for Philips



The famous Dutch brand's TV wing has emerged from significant restructuring in apparently rude health, reckons **John Archer**

PHILIPS ISN'T THE organisation it used to be. Literally. Over recent years bits of its business have been licensed off to various third-party companies, leaving many to wonder if the brand could retain the innovative and imaginative technological DNA that's served it so well for decades.

The process of brand fragmentation has been especially difficult for Philips' TV division. The deal with new owner TP Vision took so long to work out that I sometimes doubted it would ever happen, and it coincided painfully with a startling lack of new TVs and panel production facilities just when the Philips brand most needed to retain a presence in an increasingly crowded marketplace.

Now, though, Philips appears to be awakening from its slumber in emphatic style. It has a fresh R&D facility in Ghent, Belgium, and access to new LCD production lines through a deal with manufacturing giant Hisense. (The latter is so significant that TP Vision's Director of Product Strategy and Planning, Danny Tack, describes it as 'TP Vision taking its future back into its own hands.') It also has a new technological spring in its step, driven, in particular, by a little something called High Dynamic Range.

So confident is TP Vision/Philips about its position as 2015 begins, in fact, that it invited *HCC* to its sparkling new Ghent facility so we could see for ourselves the substance behind the fighting talk.

New home, new blood

The TP Vision Innovation Site Europe is a large, ultra-modern facility built on a Technology Park at the heart of Ghent University. As Site Head Rob Jonckheere pointed out, this puts Philips in the middle of an energetic, forward-looking community 'with ready

access to the next generation of engineering brainpower.' Philips has already established an ongoing project with Ghent University, in fact, focused on next-generation video processing.

On the Innovation Site's numerous floors can be found divisions working on system innovations and TV architectures for high-end Philips TVs, as well as TP Vision's broadcast certification for Europe. And aside from the experience of seeing the Philips brand safely ensconced in such an impressive facility owned by a company as large as TP Vision (which is now, as Jonckheere pointed out, 'the biggest [LCD] panel maker in the world'), our tour of the R&D facilities uncovered some interesting TV directions Philips is heading in.

First up there's High Dynamic Range (HDR). As its name implies, this is video with an unprecedented contrast, achieved by a massive increase in peak luminance. Seen by some in the CE industry as important as high frame-rate (HFR) and 4K resolution in the drive to deliver ultra-realistic images, HDR is a buzzword that won't be going away, and Philips (along with the likes of Dolby) is a keen advocate.

One entire side of Danny Tack's new lab was devoted to demonstrating the picture quality benefits you can get by driving LCD TVs with very high levels of brightness. Four screens were on show, ranging in brightness from the 450 nits of a current 'normal' edge LED TV to a high-brightness edge LED TV running at 700 nits, a 1000-nit model driven by a locally-dimmed direct LED lighting engine, and a jaw-droppingly intense prototype pumping out 4000 nits, achieved via >



Danny Tack believes OLED needs to brighten up...

A 4,000 nit display (left) versus a typical screen





Also lurking in the Philips demo room was a prototype OLED screen

a combination of a high transmittance panel and a hefty dollop of electricity.

Unsurprisingly, the super-bright panel had an inspired effect, with those 4000 nits making colours appear very vibrant, dynamic and lifelike; shadow details seem much more abundant; and contrast staggeringly extreme.

With a shot of a tiger's face, for instance, the 4000-nit screen delivered the subtle colour differences of the big cat's hair with astonishing accuracy. The way the black lines contrasted with the yellow fur was stunning too, showing that more brightness doesn't have to mean a reduced black level. And the image popped off the screen with an intensity that made the less bright TVs look like you were watching them through sunglasses.

Each screen step-up in brightness delivered a level of image improvement, which is an important point given the current impossibility of producing 4000-nit screens without murdering power efficiency regulations.

Before getting too pumped at the idea of an imminent HDR future, it's worth stressing that for a genuine experience the content needs to be shot and distributed in HDR. This could delay the timescale in which the format becomes mainstream even beyond the consumer hardware challenges. Typically, Netflix is one content provider that has said it has HDR plans, while the Blu-ray Disc Association has stated it will be part of the eventual 4K BD spec.

OLED in the shadows

There's no doubt that the Philips/TP Vision HDR prototype seems a very exciting prospect for the future. And there's also no doubt that HDR suits the brand's traditionally intense, dynamic approach to TV pictures. The same cannot be said for OLED.

In Ghent I got my first glimpse of a Philips-branded OLED TV up and

running – and looking superb. Yet Tack was pretty downbeat about OLED's position within TP Vision's plans. 'With its wide colour gamut and much brighter light output we see LCD as better positioned to meet future standards than OLED,' he explained. 'When OLED solves its light output issue I will be its biggest fan. But I don't see this happening in less than three years.'

To illustrate his point, Tack pointed out that while LCD/LED light outputs have just gone from 500 nits to 800 nits in a single year, OLED has only boosted its brightness by around 50 nits with each new generation. So while it may be getting a name for itself because of its pure black talents, OLED still has work to do to appease Tack.

Ambilight continues to evolve

The technology that the Philips brand is probably best-known for in TV circles is Ambilight. Now entering its 11th year, it remains a key part of the Philips package, and still warrants attention from the corp's R&D team. I wasn't surprised to be ushered into the Ambilight test room for a demonstration of yet another evolution to the immersive light tech. What was surprising was the method now employed to roadtest new Ambilight flavours.

Rather than physically building different Ambilight flatscreen prototypes, the test room employs a projector to deliver life-sized graphical representations of TVs showing various Ambilight effects. Viewers can then be asked to give their opinion. Philips can even put one effect on one side of a screen and a different effect on the other for quick comparisons.

One of the most eye-catching projects Philips' Ambilight engineers are noodling on is a so-called 'projection' system. It was revealed for the first time to much oohing and aahing at the end of the company's IFA press event back in September, but having witnessed it again up close and personal, I have a few doubts.

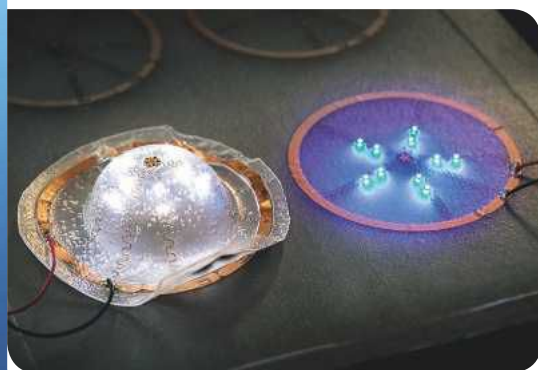
This innovation projects a replicated image of what's onscreen onto the wall beyond the TV's edges, within the usual colour 'halo' effect.

It certainly has the wow factor and seems a natural development of the Ambilight ethos. However, in its current form I have to say this technology feels a bit distracting, rather than subtly adding to the sense of immersion in the way a typical Ambilight display does. But Philips' engineers were at pains to point out this system is in very early development stages – no market date has been confirmed – so there is plenty of time to fine-tune its effectiveness.

And this wasn't the only Ambilight innovation Philips was willing to share with us. The future of its light-emitting feature may well lie with TERASEL, a Ghent-based project working to 'develop, apply and industrialise the technology for thermoplastic one-time deformable circuits' – which in layman's terms means it's trying to build electronics, including light sources, directly into plastics, rather than just mounting them on top.

It looks likely that Philips won't be losing its 'innovator' tag any time soon ■

Embedding light sources directly within thermoplastics could breathe fresh life into Philips' Ambilight tech





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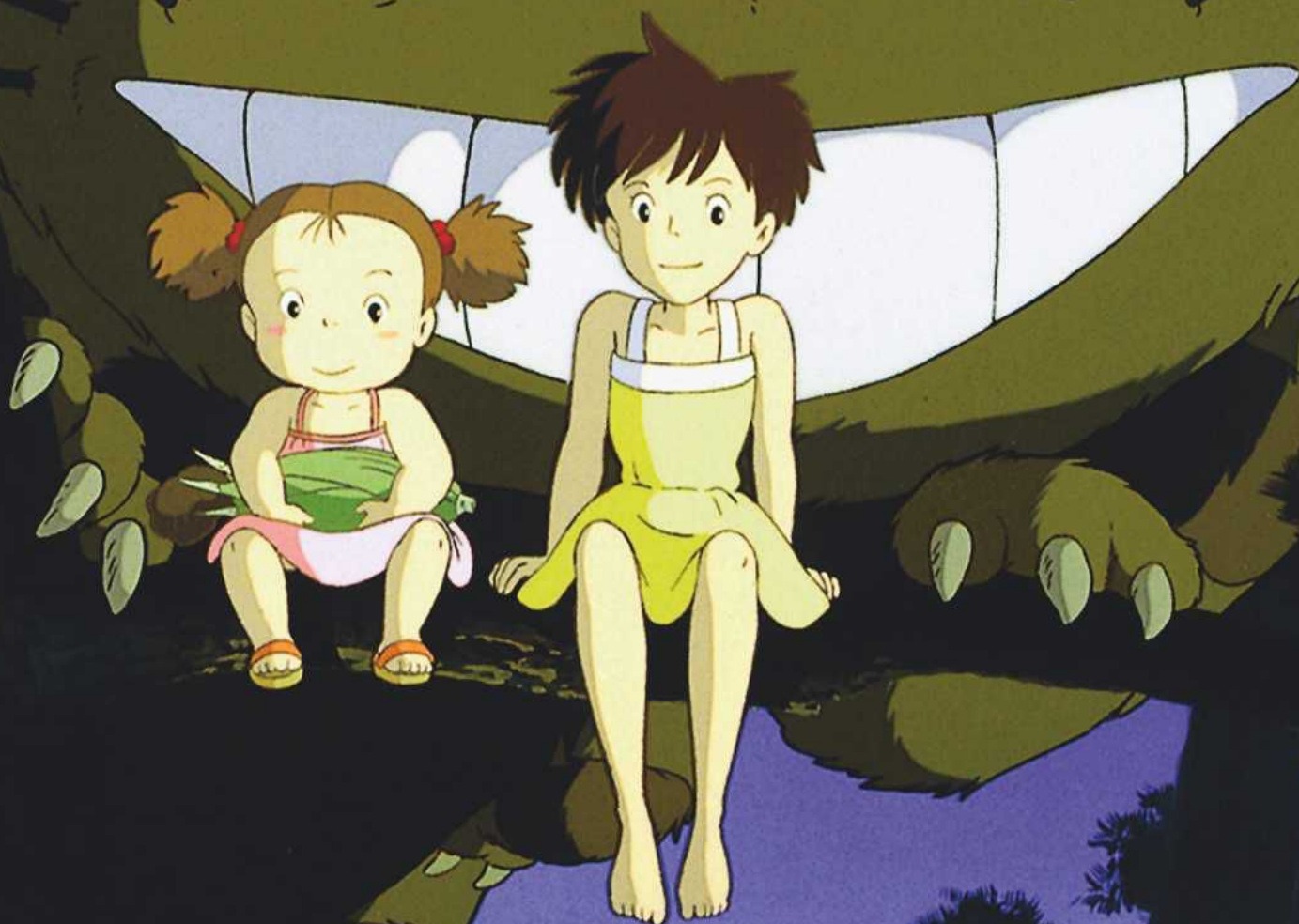
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The 25 best

ANIMATED MOVIES ON BLU-RAY!



From hand-drawn psychedelia and Rotoscoped documentaries to cutting-edge CG 'toons and 3D conversions, **Team HCC** trawls through cinema history to reveal the genre-shaping flicks that are yours to cherish in HD...

25. A SCANNER DARKLY

Indie director Richard Linklater (*Dazed and Confused*, *Before Sunset*, *er*, *School of Rock*) employed Rotoscoping (where animators draw around live-action footage) for this mind-melting sci-fi thriller. Keanu Reeves is perfectly cast as a drug-addled undercover cop, supported by Robert Downey Jr and Woody Harrelson, and the movie is well-regarded for being one of the most faithful adaptations of a Philip K Dick novel. Visually, the time-consuming Rotoscoping pays off handsomely, adding an extra layer of weirdness. The BD looks sublime, but the 5.1 mix is regular Dolby Digital.



24. THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS

Batman has a long and varied history in animation, going right back to Filmation's 1968 *The Batman/Superman Hour* TV series. In more recent years, he's starred in a number of animated movies produced for DVD and Blu-ray, the best of which is this epic adaptation of Frank Miller's legendary 1986 dystopian comic book miniseries, where an ageing Bruce Wayne comes back out of retirement to fight crime once more. Originally released in two parts across 2012/2013, dedicated Bat-fans should import the subsequent US 'Deluxe Edition' all-region Blu-ray, which edits the two together and adds some superb new extras.



23. YELLOW SUBMARINE

The Fab Four lend their song-writing prowess to this lush-looking hand-drawn musical. The premise is pure 1960s psychedelia, with the band pootling around in their eponymous vehicle doing battle with Blue Meanies to save the under-the-sea Pepperland kingdom from... oh, it doesn't matter. What matters here are the classic tunes (*Eleanor Rigby*, *All You Need is Love*, *Altogether Now*, *Yellow Submarine*...) and the groundbreaking animation design, and both of these are delivered exceptionally well by EMI's 2012 hi-def release, which is based upon a 4K restoration/cleanup and reworks the score into fulsome 5.1 mixes.



22. WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT

Yes, we know that this madcap 1988 comedy includes a live cast, but it's the use of animated characters that sticks in the memory. Director Robert Zemeckis achieved the unthinkable by having Bob Hoskins, Christopher Lloyd *et al* interact flawlessly with their 'toon counterparts, in a wickedly funny film noir pastiche littered with high-energy set-pieces and Golden Era cameos. Disney's 25th Anniversary Blu-ray, released in 2013, offers a lossless 5.1 remix, efficient transfer and a bundle of extras, including three Roger Rabbit shorts.



21. PERSEPOLIS

Based on Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel, the sublime *Persepolis* covers Satrapi's life growing up in Iran as a rebellious Iron Maiden and Bruce Lee-loving teen during the Islamic Revolution, through to living in France as a young adult. With so much of the film's power derived from its deceptively simple animation style, its thrilling to witness the clarity and organic quality that StudioCanal's BD brings to the mainly black-and-white transfer. Essentially, this looks spookily like Satrapi's original illustrations come to life.





20. RANGO

This goofy Western homage reunited *Pirates of the Caribbean* star Johnny Depp with director Gore Verbinski and won the Oscar for Best Animated Feature in 2011. Yet more notable is the fact that it was the first fully-animated film made by Industrial Light & Magic, the CG wizards best known for creating the VFX for Hollywood's biggest blockbusters. The result is a feast for your eyes, brimming with intricate character design and textures – something made all the more obvious by the film's flawless presentation on Blu-ray. One of the best-looking hi-def platters around!



19. THE LEGO MOVIE 3D

Everything really is 'awesome' when it comes to the spectacular stereoscopic Blu-ray release of last year's animated till-ringer. This hilarious post-modern 'toon displays a dazzling sense of 3D depth, insane detailing right down to tiny chips and scratches in the LEGO characters and blocks, and a boundless array of vivid hues – the result is that you're eased swiftly into the fantastic world it creates. Chuck in a reference-grade audio mix and a toy-box full of extras and you've got a faultless BD release.



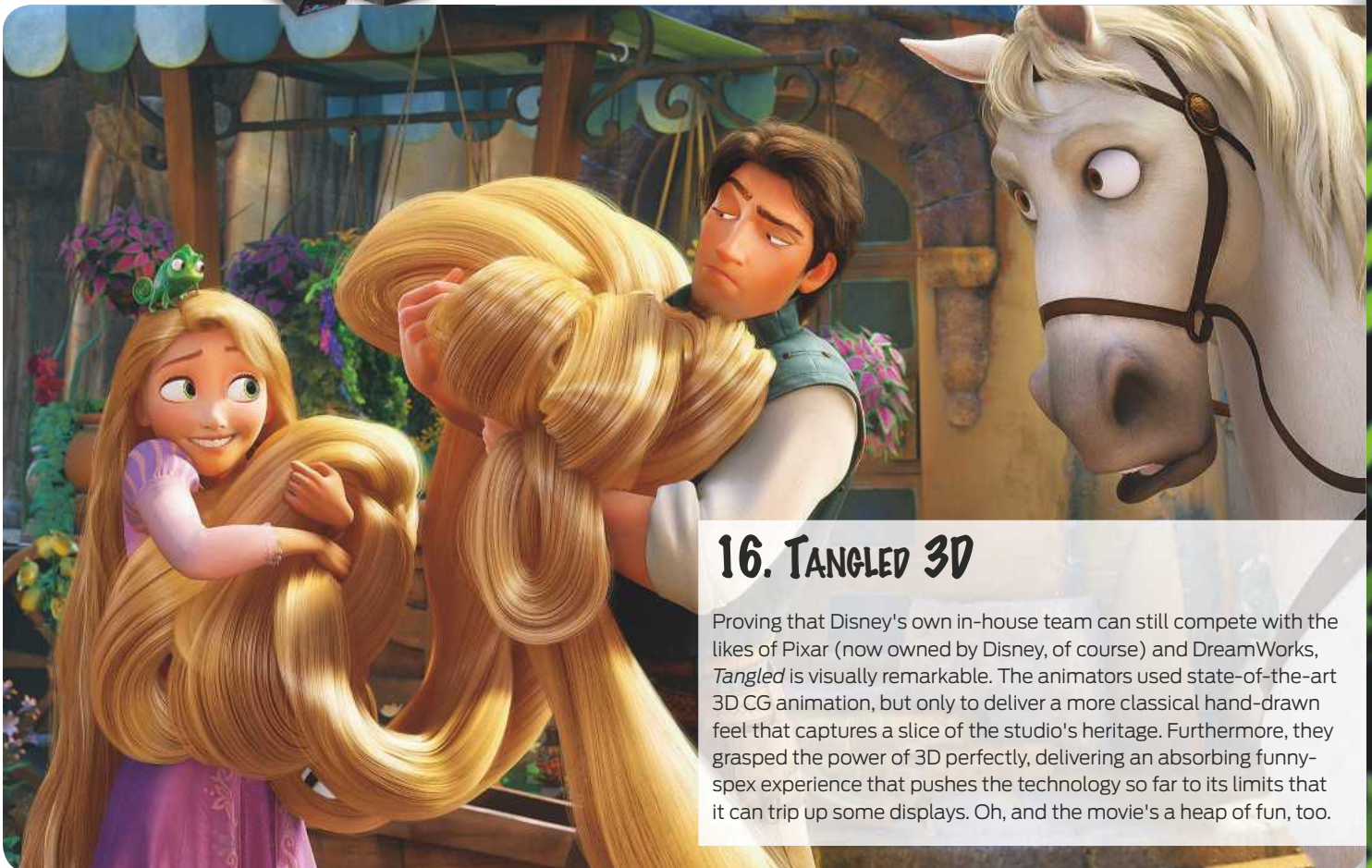
18. LES TRIPLETTES DE BELLEVILLE

This warm-hearted piece of Gallic whimsy (released as *Belleville Rendez-vous* in the UK) recounts the story of an elderly woman's journey to the metropolitan city of Belleville to rescue her grandson, a Tour de France cyclist kidnapped by the French mafia. Utilising a delightfully grotesque art style, it's a film that cries out to be watched in high-definition – which makes the lack of a UK or US BD platter so annoying. Thankfully, as the story is told mainly through music and pantomime, it means there's nothing to get in the way of importing the Region B French Blu-ray (which is also available in a double-pack with the director's second film *L'illusionniste*).



17. THE FANTASTIC MR. FOX

Having demonstrated a propensity for making so-called 'self-contained' live-action movies that employed hand-made set dressings, miniatures and even stop-motion animation, it seemed only natural that Wes Anderson would try his hand at directing a fully-animated feature. For us, this stop-motion adaptation of Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr. Fox* is perhaps Anderson's most satisfying film, the perfect example of his cinematic style and sensibilities. While 20th Century Fox's 2010 Blu-ray remains a thing of beauty, die-hard animation fans with a multi-region deck should import the 2014 Region A-locked Criterion platter from the US.



16. TANGLED 3D

Proving that Disney's own in-house team can still compete with the likes of Pixar (now owned by Disney, of course) and DreamWorks, *Tangled* is visually remarkable. The animators used state-of-the-art 3D CG animation, but only to deliver a more classical hand-drawn feel that captures a slice of the studio's heritage. Furthermore, they grasped the power of 3D perfectly, delivering an absorbing funny-spex experience that pushes the technology so far to its limits that it can trip up some displays. Oh, and the movie's a heap of fun, too.



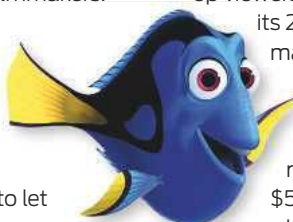
15. PAPRIKA

Satoshi Kon may have only directed a handful of films before his untimely passing in 2010, but in a 13-year career he proved himself to be one of the most stylish, ambitious and challenging anime filmmakers. *Paprika*'s cautionary narrative about a machine that allows people to enter the subconscious of others allowed Kon to let his imagination off the leash, filling the screen with a dizzying parade of images that are by turns strange, scary and spectacular. And Sony Pictures' Blu-ray (albeit an early MPEG-2 encode) delivers the experience with panache.



14. FINDING NEMO 3D

Pixar's mega-hit is a wondrous blend of CG eye-candy, slick plotting and stand-out voicework, aimed squarely at kids but with enough smarts to satisfy grown-up viewers. Yet nine years after its 2003 release, it was made even better with a high-quality stereoscopic makeover (at a rumoured cost of \$5m) that suits its underwater seascapes perfectly. The fishy stars are brought right in to your viewing room and director Andrew Stanton's aquatic playground looks large enough to swim in. Get the region-free US Collector's Ed. for the best selection of extras.



13. LE PLANETE SAUVAGE

This French-Czechoslovakian co-production (also known as *Fantastic Planet*) is the only animated feature yet to make it into Eureka's prestigious 'The Masters of Cinema Series' Blu-ray selection. Director René Laloux's sci-fi allegory was awarded the Grand Jury Prize at the 1973 Cannes Film Festival and has lost none of its power over the years, thanks largely to Polish surrealist Roland Topor's stunning cutout artwork. And not only does Eureka's handsome Blu-ray package treat the film with the TLC it deserves, it includes five additional shorts by Laloux, and legendary jazz pianist Alain Goraguer's memorable soundtrack in its entirety.



12. THE JUNGLE BOOK

Inspired by Rudyard Kipling's collection of stories about the abandoned 'man-cub' Mowgli, *The Jungle Book* (released in 1967) has long been regarded as one of the crown-jewels in the Disney back-catalogue, reason enough for the studio to give it a thorough polish for a 2013 'Diamond Edition' Blu-ray release. As good as the 'toon looks in hi-def, what makes the Blu-ray platter a must-own is the remixed DTS-HD Master Audio 7.1 soundtrack. The new multichannel mix doesn't offer much in the way of surround channel interplay (it's still very front-heavy), but makes the movie's up-tempo musical numbers sing like never before.

11. WALTZ WITH BASHIR

To many people the idea of an animated documentary is ludicrous. However, given the mixture of memories and hallucinatory dreamscapes *Waltz with Bashir* relies upon as it charts filmmaker Ari Folman's journey to uncover memories he suppressed while serving in the Israeli army, it's hard to think of a way the story could be brought to the screen with anything like the same impact. A harrowing but rewarding watch, it stands out on Blu-ray thanks to Artificial Eye's skillful encoding of its distinctive visual style.





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10. HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON 2 3D

Despite the box office success of titles like *Shrek* and *Madagascar*, DreamWorks Animation has always found itself playing second fiddle to rival Pixar. Yet it silenced critics in 2010 with the release of the spectacular *How to Train Your Dragon*, a modern classic that it somehow managed to improve upon with last year's bigger, bolder and brainier sequel. *HTTYD2* is also one of the current flag-bearers for 3D home cinema, unleashing a cavalcade of breathtaking stereoscopic sequences that put many other efforts to shame.



9. GRAVE OF THE FIREFLIES

Something of an anomaly in the Studio Ghibli back-catalogue, Isao Takahata's award-winning 1988 flick eschews whimsical flights of fancy in favour of recounting the rather grim story of two young Japanese children struggling to stay alive during the final months of the second World War. *Frozen*, it isn't: instead, it's easily on a par with live-action classics such as *Come and See* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* in its ability to confront viewers with the horrors of war. Have some tissues ready to dab your eyes and then savour the movie's appearance on Blu-ray, not least the beautiful handling of the film's detailed artwork.



8. BEAUTY AND THE BEAST 3D

Disney has given several of its modern movies 3D ret-cons on Blu-ray, but none have benefitted from the transformation quite as much as this beloved 1991 musical fairy-tale. The post-production wizardry adds a noticeable sense of depth to the more traditionally animated material, and helps integrate computer-rendered 3D backgrounds (as famously used in the ballroom dance scene) far better than the original 2D version ever managed. Better still, the Blu-ray's stunning 3D visuals are matched by a stonking DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack.



7. THE INCREDIBLES

We sometimes wonder why 20th Century Fox bothered to release *Fantastic Four* in 2005, because Pixar had already nailed the superhero-family theme a year earlier with this rollicking caper written and directed by Brad Bird. And on Blu-ray, *The Incredibles* lives up to its name, with a colour-rich, brilliantly sharp 1080p encode and a boisterous, layered, impeccable lossless surround mix. Don't own it? Head straight for the two-disc US release and bypass the almost bare-bones UK single-platter version.



6. PINOCCHIO

Disney's second feature-length animation remains as perfect a film as the iconic studio has ever produced. The adapted story of a wooden puppet brought to life by a fairy, *Pinocchio* is a deceptively simple coming-of-age tale that still has the power to make grown men cry (well, some Team HCC members, anyway), when they're not distracted by the sumptuous imagery. Released to coincide with the movie's 70th anniversary in 2010, the Platinum Edition Blu-ray benefits from a meticulous frame-by-frame restoration and a vast array of supplementary material, including a picture-in-picture video commentary exploring *Pinocchio*'s production and enduring legacy. We won't lie to you – this is a cracking disc.



5. AKIRA

Another milestone in the history of animation, Katsuhiro Otomo's film adaptation of his own epic sci-fi comic is probably single-handedly responsible for introducing the world of Japanese anime to Western audiences – and reminding many that adult-orientated 'toons could be just as successful as those made for children. When the 1988 dystopian gore-fest finally surfaced in high-definition in 2011 the major talking point for AV freaks wasn't the restored 1.85:1 1080p encode (which was very impressive), but the 'Hypersonic' audio mix, with *Akira*'s Japanese Dolby TrueHD 5.1 track a pristine, audiophile-pleasing 192kHz affair rather than the standard 48kHz.



4. THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS

Henry Selick's musical fantasy (co-written/produced by Hollywood's in-house madman Tim Burton) is, we'd hazard, the only family-friendly mash-up of the macabre and festive, with its bizarre tale of Halloween Town residents staging a coup on Christmas. Yet something that could easily have gone so wrong arrives on screen feeling oh-so right, be it the lovingly-crafted stop-motion animation or the foot-tapping tunes. The DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundmix is the star of the audio-visual show, closely followed by Disney's strong 1080p transfer. A 3D version (from the 2006 ret-conned cinema release) is also an option, but we prefer the flat original, to be honest.



3. SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS

Here, it is: the first feature-length film ever made completely using hand-drawn animation. With that in mind, it's hard to overstate the impact that 1937's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* had on the movie industry, birthing a genre that shows no sign of fading away. For the modern HD era, Disney delivered a gorgeous new hi-def restoration, but just make sure to track down the (sadly out-of-print) 2009 multi-disc 'Diamond Edition' if you want to enjoy the full assortment of extra features.



2. THE HAYAO MIYAZAKI COLLECTION

Who can rival the consistent quality shown by Japanese animation guru Hayao Miyazaki? No one, basically. Every one of the films he directed (from 1979's *The Castle of Cagliostro* to last year's *The Wind Rises*) is a work of art. StudioCanal's recent Blu-ray boxset has saved us the arduous task of choosing between them, by bringing together HD versions of all 13 flicks. An essential purchase, although for bonus features you can't beat the standalone platters.



1. TOY STORY TRILOGY

Blagging top spot is Pixar's effortlessly likeable movie series following the exploits of Woody, Buzz and gang. The original made the studio the powerhouse that it is today, the sequel proved it could repeat the magic, and the third saw cast and crew returning after 11 years and picking up right where they'd left off (and introducing Dolby 7.1 to cinemas...). All three are pure popcorn fun and as a trilogy there's no better example of the CG 'toon revolution. Roll on *Toy Story 4*!



Upgrading for Ultra Hi-Def



The owner of this dedicated movie room felt an audio-visual makeover was in order after five years of service. **Mark Craven** reports

KIT CHECKLIST

GENELEC: 3 x HT312 active speakers; 6 x AIW25 active speakers; HTS4B active subwoofer

ANTHEM: MRX 510 AV receiver (pre-outs to Genelec speakers)

SONY: VPL-VW500ES 4K SXRD projector

CHIEF: Projector ceiling mount

SCREEN EXCELLENCE: 120in 2.35:1 ratio acoustically transparent projector screen

OPPO: BDP-103D multi-region, multi-zone Blu-ray player

SKY: Sky+HD receiver

CRESTRON: CP2E control processor

RTI: T2x remote control using Crestron codes



The extensive disc collection is hidden away in décor-matched cupboards



'ONE THING THAT' is inevitable in the home entertainment industry is that technology marches on.' So says Phillip Warris, director of St Albans-based install outfit FAB Audio Visual. He is, of course, spot on – just think how much your own home cinema system has developed over, say, the last five years. Source, display, processing, power and even speakers may all have changed.

This pro-grade cinema room is an example. Originally designed by FAB back in 2009, the company was asked by the owner last Summer to specify and install some new, cutting-edge hardware. An upgrade, the owner felt, was due, and he wanted new options for both audio and video.

Higher resolution

Unsurprisingly, the previous Full HD projector has been replaced with a 4K model. A lengthy shootout between Sony's VPL-VW500ES and its VPL-VW1100ES higher-spec stablemate, with native 4K material supplied from a RED player, saw the owner coming down in favour of the more affordable model, believing it to be the better balance of cost/function. But it's not just an improvement in resolution that's been achieved. The Sony PJ offers a far greater brightness output than the JVC HD100 that was installed all those years ago, and its 3D playback has become a firm favourite. Seven pairs of active shutter specx are on hand for big sporting events.

Fitting the VPL-VW500ES meant some system streamlining was also possible. Before, a Schneider anamorphic lens had been employed for 2.35:1 viewing, but Sony's lens memory system saw that accessory made redundant. A DVDO scaler has also been jettisoned from the video chain in favour of the PJ's own processing power, and the Onkyo BD-SP807 Blu-ray deck replaced by an Oppo BDP-103D, partly for its quicker boot-up speeds.

On the audio side, we're not surprised to see the Genelec array remaining in situ

>

RTI touchscreen remote control is a new addition



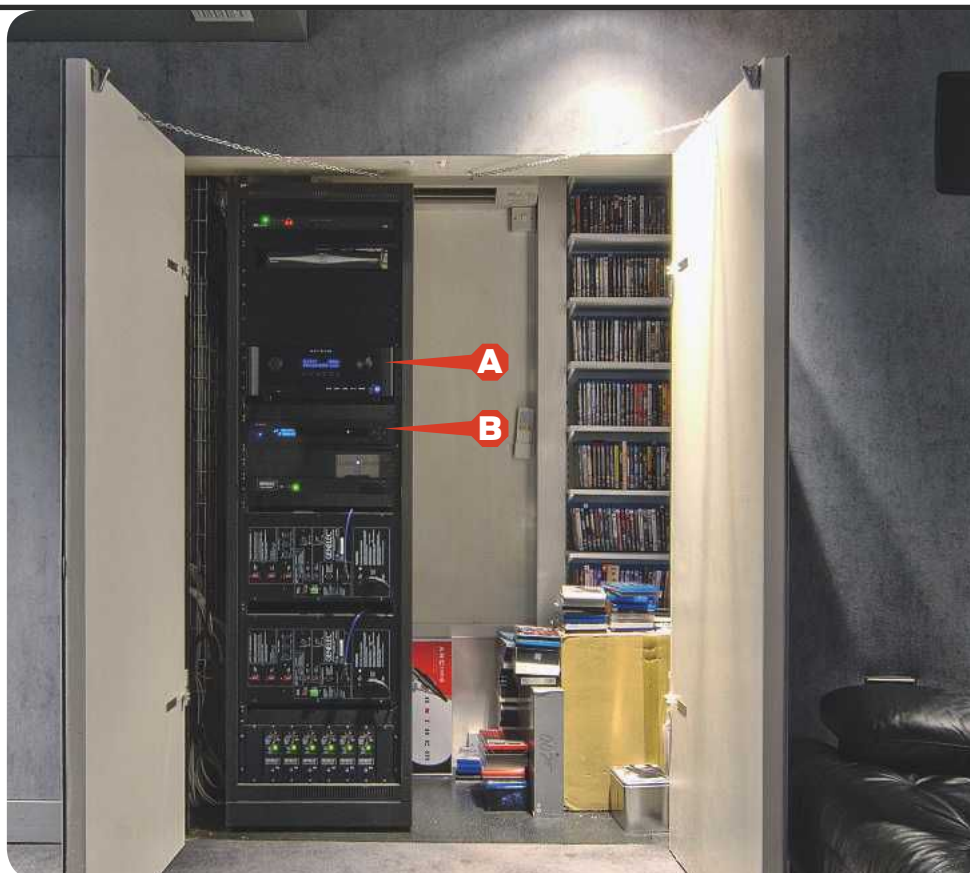
– speakers don't become outdated that quickly! However, these being active models, it was decided the system's performance could be improved by upgrading the processing side. An Anthem MRX 510 AV receiver slotted into the kit rack (with its pre-outs feeding the Genelec speakers), and out came a previous Onkyo/Audyssey Pro combi. 'The reason for selecting the Anthem product was for the fabulous ARC 2 room correction software,' explains the installer, and its before-and-after correction graphs let the owner see exactly what alterations it was making.

One for The Road

Other tweaks have been made, including new RTI touchscreen controllers, but it's the overall step-up in AV quality that the owner is naturally most thrilled with. He told *HCC* that a screening of *The Road* immediately justified the investment.

'It's a Blu-ray I'd watched last year. Seeing the film with the benefit of the newly upgraded equipment was a pleasure. The imagery is mostly stark with lots of greys and blacks, and this is juxtaposed with occasional flashback scenes to pre-apocalyptic times filmed in very vibrant colours. The new projector handled the greys and blacks brilliantly, giving much more depth and richness, and when the flashback scenes cut in there was a real visual punch.

'We also had the sound management upgraded in the room. The new system is remarkable – the Genelec speakers are as flawless as ever – but the increase in sound quality is huge compared to the financial investment made. The end result is a far more immersive cinematic experience.' ■



INSTALL INFO

A PROCESSING POWER

The ARC 2 room/speaker optimisation skills of Anthem's MRX 510 receiver was a key factor when it came to revamping the cinema's audio performance

B CONTENT KINGS

A Sky+HD PVR is ready for bigscreen sports viewing, while an Oppo BDP-103D handles Blu-rays

C STILL ROCKIN'

The surround and rear channel speakers are all Genelec A1W25s. In-wall models, each employs a rack-mounted amplifier module to drive its 5in bass driver and 0.75in tweeter

D NEW ADDITION

A Sony VPL-VW500ES projector has replaced the previous JVC model, bringing 3D playback, 4K resolution and an increase in brightness from 600 Lumens to 1,700





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REVIEWS

→ **HARDWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **SONY** The brand's most affordable 4K projector yet **DENON** AVR-X5200W offers Atmos and Auro-3D **MONITOR AUDIO** Floorstanding Radius speaker package **LG** 55in curved OLED TV **SVS** Ported 12in subwoofer **AMAZON** Fire TV media player **POLK** Sub/sat array **SOUNDBASE SPEAKERS** Canton, Roth, Yamaha and Samsung go head-to-head **AND MORE**

Sonic solution

Does Yamaha's YSP-2500 digital sound projector outgun its rivals? See p44

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★★☆☆
Dire	★★★☆☆

Bigscreen Ultra HD is made even more attainable by the VPL-VW300ES, says **Steve May**

Sony's 4K superhero

NOT UNLIKE TONY Curtis in *The Boston Strangler*, Sony continues to tighten its grip on the premium end of the home cinema projection market. Suave, good-looking and surprisingly cheap (in an admittedly expensive way), the VPL-VW300ES is the fourth 4K/Ultra HD SXRD projector to be released by the brand, and arguably it's most compelling.

Motorized zoom and focus controls are accessed via the remote



If you're looking to upgrade to the latest theatrical standards, then this projector appears a mad bargain – bigscreen home cinema doesn't get much more exciting than this.

Strategically priced below £6,000, there are only a few differences between the VPL-VW300ES and its more expensive VPL-VW500ES stablemate. The pair share the same Triluminos colour and image processing engines beneath their matching bonnets, as well as identical optics and up to 4,096 x 2,160 resolution content support.

So exactly what corners have been cut to hit the lower price point? If you buy a VPL-VW300ES you'll sacrifice the dynamic iris control of the VW500 and have slightly less brightness to bathe in (the VW300 is rated at 1,500 Lumens colour light output, rather than 1,700). As it happens, these omissions aren't particularly painful. Also missing is the lens memory function of its step-up brother, used when switching between CinemaScope and 1.85:1 sources. This will probably only be an issue if you've had such luxury in the past.

Good-lookin' light-cannon

The VPL-VW300ES is a well-appointed projector, and not imposingly large. The familiar SXRD matt finish is complemented by Sony's characteristic centre-placed



The VPL-VW300ES is Sony's newest and most affordable 4K projector

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
4K/UHD projector
using SXRD tech

POSITION:
Sony's entry-level
next-gen PJ, below
the VPL-VW500ES

PEERS:
JVC DLA-X500R;
Sony VPL-VW500ES





The onboard Contrast Enhancer processing is worth investigating

gold-rimmed lens. Connectivity includes dual HDMI 2.0 inputs with support for HDCP 2.2 on the second HDMI. There's also a USB port and two 12V triggers for automated control of drop-down screens and similar system integration. All these inputs are ranged along the side rather than at the back, as is Sony's wont. There are no updates to the VPL-VW300ES' menu and setup routines. The interface remains unfussy and business-like, with easy to navigate tabs.

Room installation is made relatively straightforward by the projector's 2.06x zoom and accommodating lens shift range (31 per cent horizontal, 80/85 per cent vertical).

Electronic zoom and focus control are available directly from the wand-like remote control. Simply punch the Pattern button and a wireframe grid pops up, allowing you to manipulate throw and focus.

You'll not have to spend overlong on calibration either, because it looks good straight from the box. There's a broad selection of pre-calibrated settings, labelled Reference, Cinema Film 1 and 2, Photo, Game, Bright Cinema, Bright TV and User. The two Bright settings significantly boost luminosity and make the projector usable in a moderately well-lit media room. Even with low levels of ambient light, colours remain strong and there's enough contrast to preserve serviceable image depth. These Bright modes do, of course, also cause a corresponding increase in fan noise. So much so, that it's a positive relief to flip back to the default (and well-behaved) Reference mode.

At times I found myself watching this Sony in slack-jawed amazement. The copious detail

in the image, luxuriant colours and deep black level are mesmerising, even with Full HD upscaled content. With the Tom Cruise sci-fi actioner *Edge of Tomorrow*, the bewildering clarity of the opening 'Live. Die. Repeat' beach invasion is nothing less than extraordinary. Sony's 4K upscaler adds weight and authenticity to the battle armour and Dropships, yet skin tones and textures are never overwrought. The Mimic slaughter is brilliantly delineated.

Image processing proves to be a major strength of the VPL-VW300ES. With Reality Creation, Sony has mastered the trick of boosting subjective clarity and resolution, even with native 4K images, without creating unwanted side effects. While there's an option to turn Reality Creation off, there's no reason to do so. It plays a major role in crafting the sumptuous detail of the image.

In *Godzilla*, sequences of a devastated Honolulu after a spectacular monster showdown exhibit extraordinary finesse. Reality Creation does sterling work here. When it's switched off, the image almost defocuses; however, when engaged, fine details pop. You can really appreciate the wrecked news helicopter, its tail section broken off, and the shattered apartment buildings, smoke billowing, and the populace meandering through the rubble. It's all too easy to believe that you're watching pukka 4K.

Motion handling can also be considered above average. Motionflow modes comprise Smooth High and Smooth Low settings, plus Impulse, Combination and True Cinema. The Impulse setting is particularly impressive. Moving images are clean with no obvious artefacting, while horizontal pans are rendered smooth, with only mild loss of



Both the HDMI inputs are v2.0, with HDMI 2 supporting HDCP 2.2

detail. It's extremely filmic. True Cinema is similarly watchable. Conversely, Smooth High is best avoided as it exhibits clear motion artefacts (a sort of smudgy halo), even though it retains plenty of detail. For sports presentations, I would probably opt for Smooth Low or Combination, both of which reduce artefacts.

To evaluate the projector with native 4K content, I fed it a selection of sequences shot on a Sony FDR-AX100 4K camcorder, at 3,840

'This projector is an irresistible proposition for home cinema fans, capable of stunning 2,160p images'

x 2,160/30fps: exteriors, parklands, everyday fare. With this, the VPL-VW300ES really shone. As good as the upscaling technology beneath the lid is, the raw detail in an 8-megapixel image is something else again. 4K, it must be stressed, is perfect for largescreen projection. I ran the Sony at 120in across and stuck my nose up to the screen. The image scales with no visible pixel structure. It's positively photographic.

Gaming has obvious appeal on such a beast, too. When hooking up a next-gen console, opt for the low-latency Game mode (a new addition on the VW300ES) which claims a response time of just 0.5ms. *Destiny* on the PlayStation 4 proved to be an incredibly bold and exciting experience.

What's on the menu?

While this isn't a projector that demands much in terms of calibration, there are a variety of tweaks and nudges in the menus which can make a big difference to the onscreen image. The three-level Contrast Enhancer is a case in point. Cueing up Bryan Cranston's face in *Godzilla* is particularly revealing. Freeze-frame the actor's craggy visage, as it's held half in shadow, and you'll be surprised just how much extra visual snap can be created by notching the Enhancer up from off to its Low setting. However, while Middle and High appear to enhance definition even further there is a trade-off in cinematic quality, so show restraint. A little goes a long way.

There are options for D93, D75 and D65 colour standards, with room to customise if required. The former gives a cold, crisp white much appreciated in Japanese broadcasting that I rather like. It works particularly well with HD studio content. D65 is much warmer and should be your go-to for movie playback.

The projector may lack a dynamic iris but there's no sense of compromise. The image dynamics remain pronounced and the

black level generally impressive. Performance is very similar to the VPL-VW500ES. Abe's wetsuit in *Hellboy 2* is as black as squid ink, while the steam-powered automatons of the Golden Army have an inner core that glows a fiery orange.

Another area where the VPL-VW300ES excels, perhaps surprisingly, is with 3D. The projector, which is Active Shutter compatible, is capable of excellent depth; there's little to be concerned about when it comes to double imaging. In many ways 4K upscaling injects fresh life into 3D content, bequeathing welcome solidity to the image. That infamous 3D torture test, more commonly known as the menu to Disney's *Tangled*, is a good example. The floating lanterns are tightly portrayed with little obvious crosstalk. When we get to Flynn Rider's POV as he holds onto the tree branch, hooves pounding down to dislodge him, there's a dizzying sense of depth and scale to the sequence. The stereography is consistently bright and lush, making even the most disposable of animations a visual delight. Any fears that 3D might suffer from a lack of brightness prove unfounded. In a full dark room, the projector remains defiantly theatrical.

There's no dangle to worry about either. 3D syncing is achieved via a built-in RF 3D transmitter. I auditioned this projector with the brand's own TDG-BT500A Active Shutter RF glasses, which are comfortable enough and sync automatically. Theoretically, the projector is compatible with the universal RF 3D glasses standard, opening up a choice in dimensional goggles. However, for some reason this Sony categorically refused to acknowledge RF standard glasses made by Epson (I happened to have a pair around to try at the time), so wider standards compliance can't be guaranteed. Best stick with Sony-branded specs for certain compatibility.

Seductive Sony

The VPL-VW300ES is an almost irresistible proposition for home theatre fans. Its ability to deliver stunning 2,160p images, with deep blacks and wide gamut colour, is unceasingly seductive. And with 60fps support and HDCP 2.2 it's fully prepped for the next generation of native 4K content, be it from souped-up Blu-ray discs or internet delivery. There are minor caveats, of course. You'll find quieter projectors from rivals. Operating noise is high without being symphonic. Mounted too close to a seating position and you'll most certainly know that it's there. The RF glasses incompatibility is a minor annoyance as well.

Yet these are easy bugbears to live with. Overall, Sony's VPL-VW300ES is remarkable. Living with anything else just seems so... unnecessary. Owning one will be like having exclusive access to the best multiplex in town ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active Shutter

4K: Yes. 4,096 x 2,160

CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI; Ethernet; USB; 2 x 12V triggers; RS232

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 1,500 Lumens

CONTRAST (CLAIMED): N/A

DIMENSIONS: 496(w) x 195(h) x 464(d)mm

WEIGHT: 14kg

FEATURES: SXRD technology; 230W Ultra High-pressure lamp; 26dB fan noise (claimed); 2.06x motorized zoom; Motionflow; Contrast Enhancer; 60in to 300in screen size; Triluminos colour; HDCP 2.2 support; 9 x picture modes; 11 x gamma modes; lens shift (-80%/+85% vertical; +/- 31% horizontal)

HCC VERDICT



Sony VPL-VW300ES

→ £5,850 approx → www.sony.co.uk

→ Tel: 020 7365 2413

HIGHS: Outstanding native 4K image quality; high-quality Full HD upscaler; good black performance; immersive 3D

LOWS: Not the brightest of projectors; no lens memory; no dynamic iris

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Richard Stevenson is thrilled to be able to make use of his 11-channel Atmos speaker array

Denon's do-it-all AV receiver

FULL 7.2.4 DOLBY Atmos processing, nine channels of amplification, networking, Bluetooth, AirPlay, Spotify Connect and an Auro-3D upgrade to boot. Denon's AVR-X5200W has certainly been an exciting AV receiver to live with. And excitement... well, that's what home cinema is all about.

I'll admit I was itching to get this Denon in. Having gone to the trouble of establishing a 7.2.4 speaker system complete with ceiling-mounted height speakers in anticipation of Dolby Atmos delights, the first AVR I tested was Pioneer's SC-LX88, but its nine-channel processing limit meant two of my speakers had to remain unprovoked.

The AVR-X5200W, on the other hand, offers 11-channel processing to enable a domestic Atmos speaker ensemble with four height speakers atop a traditional seven-channel layout. It's not all plain multichannel sailing though. Like the Pioneer, the Denon has nine channels of power (140W), despite offering connectivity for up to 13 speakers (allowing you to switch from, say, Atmos 7.2.4 to Audyssey DSX height channels on the fly). Channel assignment and external power amps are required for the complete experience and those 13 speakers can be arranged in some mindbogglingly diverse configurations. With the main five speakers set, you get to choose combinations of rear-backs, one-to-four ceiling speakers, front and rear heights, centre height and front-width. Very complex.

Then, as if to add a layer of enthusiast-level aggro to proceedings, Auro-3D was added to the Denon's 'can do' list via a (£150) firmware update. This next-gen audio standard uses a completely different overhead speaker arrangement to Atmos, including front and rear stereo height speakers and a central 'voice of God' channel. For most people it will be an installation/setup choice between Atmos and Auro-3D, as being able to switch between them

Denon's zapper is quite straightforward for a high-end AV receiver...



easily would require more speakers than I could count. As Atmos comes as standard while Auro-3D costs extra (and has no BD software yet) I have an idea what most users will go for.

Stepping back from the speaker arrangement madness, the AVR-X5200W looks sumptuous, is solidly built, and at least makes other areas of your AV life less complicated courtesy of DLNA networking and integrated Wi-Fi and Bluetooth.

Audyssey's MultEQ XT32 room EQ system is also there to help. This uses a rather lengthy eight-point measurement system. Denon includes a flat-packed cardboard mic stand, allowing you to position the mic at ear-height in the listening positions. If you employ an Audyssey Pro installer to fettle your AVR, you also get Sub EQ HT equalisation for two woofers and an increase to a ridiculously lengthy 32-point EQ measurement. I assume Audyssey Pro installers charge by the hour.

Sonic after-care

A sideline of Dolby's Atmos initiative is the new Dolby Surround feature. This post-processing reduces user options but self-selects the best option for your chosen speaker setup. Thus if you have height channels connected, for instance, the Dolby Surround mode will default to Dolby Pro-Logic IIz in the absence of an Atmos bitstream. The best part of Dolby Surround is its ability to 'upscale' non-Atmos material and map some information to your Atmos speakers. This gives a solid 3D sound effect with even Dolby Digital 5.1 material. It's something of a 'virtual height' system and





AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Networked Atmos
AV receiver

POSITIONING:
One step down
from the flagship
AVR-X7200W

PEERS:
Pioneer SC-LX88;
Yamaha RX-A2040



Owners will probably want to
peel those stickers off...



The Denon offers 11 speaker terminals, plus 13.2-channel pre-outs

works well. If you have gone to the effort of setting up Atmos speakers, Dolby Surround will be your friend no matter how many channels the incoming stream has.

For the audio DSP engine Denon has opted for a new SHARC unit promising 10GFlops of processing power. Which is a lot, apparently. Meanwhile, DenonLink AL24+ offers advanced player-to-AVR clock timing synchronisation to deliver near jitter-free data transfer for improved two-channel audio. For music fans there is also 24-bit/192kHz high-resolution support across a wide range of formats.

Let the wizard guide you...

Get into the GUI and you'll find the route to audio nirvana has a couple of options. The first is to run the setup wizard; the second is to go it alone in manual setup mode. The latter option requires an adventurous spirit. Even starting

'The overall balance is fast and detailed, with razor-sharp transients and plenty of punch in the low frequencies'

with the wizard is not as comfortably obvious as you might like, particularly if you are interested in the 13.2 speaker support option. Assigning the nine onboard amps and four pre-outs is limited to a few options rather than being freely assignable, and the terminal labelling could do with a re-think.

Denon's smart device app is pretty good but no use for setup, and the GUI has its more confusing moments, too. There is a setting for 11.1-channel sound and another for Atmos 11.1, with slightly different terminal configurations for height channels. Go figure. Let's just say it's not exactly 'plug and play' on the speaker front – networking features, often the nemesis of earlier AVRs, are, conversely, a doddle to set up and use. The app worked seamlessly, DLNA streaming was as simple as AirPlay, and Spotify Connect Premium at 320kbps rocked.

Even with some two-channel '70s rock I could immediately hear the AVR-X5200W is something a bit special, sonically. The sheer air and space around instruments is breath-taking. The overall balance is fast and detailed with razor-sharp transients and plenty of punch in the low frequencies.

Switch to a good film soundtrack and the Denon comfortably earns its crust. Playing *Gravity* (I wish the Atmos re-release would hurry up) results in a soundstage the size of a small universe, yet crafted with a precision and clarity that's inspired. In fact, the AVR-X5200W comprehensively outgunned the Pioneer SC-LX88 in my room – and I liked the Pioneer, too (see *HCC* #241).

But the headline act for me is Dolby Atmos in 7.2.4 configuration. I achieved this by running the seven main channels from the Denon and the four ceiling speakers using pre-outs connected to a five-channel power amp. The result with an Atmos-encoded track was jaw-dropping – Dolby's demo disc is clearly set up to wow, and it does.

The excellent clarity and spatial separation noticeable in stereo is mapped into three dimensions that pack the room with clear details and super-taught effects. Deep LFE moments become physical events, while the top-end detail dances a fine line between crystal precision and glassy edginess. The fabulous *Leaf* clip is nearly as real and tangible as I remember it in the Atmos theatre in Dolby HQ. And while *The Expendables 3* isn't as skillfully mixed in Atmos, it still brings out the Denon's good nature. Its 11.2-channel steering dumped me cleanly and accurately in the midst of the action; there was nothing else to do but hold on and enjoy the ride.

Quiet scenes impress too. With Atmos the Denon has an uncanny ability to place effects in free space, with an ambience and nuance that feels very real indeed.

Denon's AVR-X5200W is therefore a triumph of cutting-edge features and multichannel performance, even if the path to reaching this state of sonic enlightenment is a bit arduous. Channel assignment limitations and a challenging GUI aside, this is first-rate ■

ON THE MENU



→ Setup and installation is aided by the GUI, but beware that extensive speaker arrangements will take time to implement

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUE HD: Yes. Plus Dolby Atmos & Dolby Surround

DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. Plus Neo: X

THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: Yes. 7.1 channel

MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT: Yes. 11.2-channel

CLAIMED POWER OUTPUT: 9 x 140W (into 8 ohms)

MULTIROOM: Yes. Zones 2 & 3

HDMI: 8 x inputs; 3 x outputs

COMPONENT VIDEO: 3 x inputs; 1 x output

AV INPUTS: 5 x composite; 5 x digital audio (2 x optical, 2 x coaxial, 1 x Denon HD Link)

VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K

DIMENSIONS: 434(w) x 393(d) x 167(h)mm

WEIGHT: 14.2kg

ALSO FEATURING: Auro-3D via paid upgrade; Audyssey MultEQ XT32 room EQ; ISF video calibration; control app; Denon Link AL24+; Ethernet; built-in Wi-Fi; network streaming; Airplay; Bluetooth aptX; Spotify Connect; universal remote

HCC VERDICT



Denon AVR-X5200W

→ £1,700 Approx → www.denon.co.uk

→ Tel: 0289 0279 830

HIGHS: Exhilarating and open sound; 7.2.4 Atmos and Auro-3D processing (via upgrade); multi-source/multi-zone HDMI; robust networking

LOWS: Limited channel assignment options; complex GUI; 'only' nine power amps

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

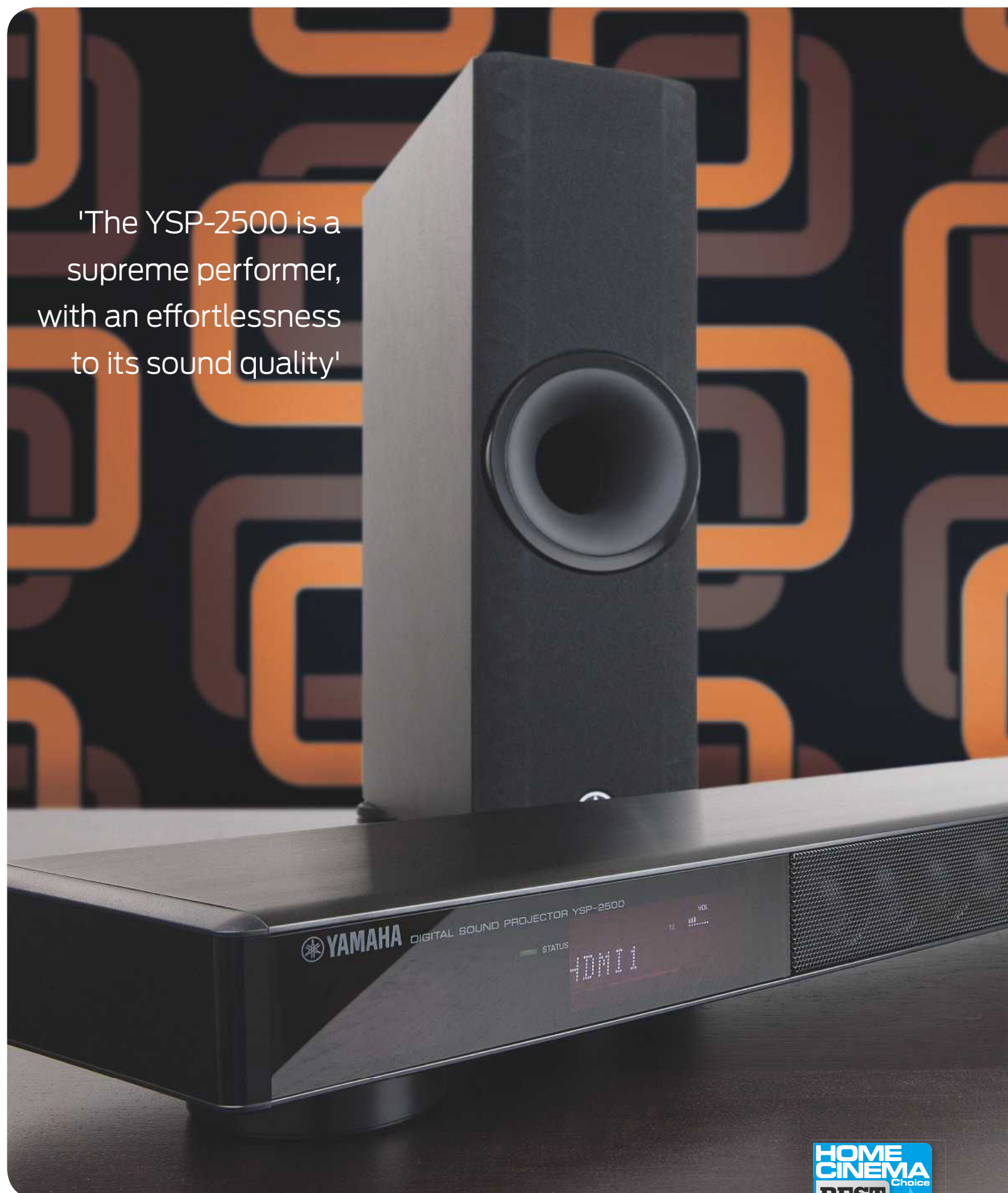
Overall ★★★★★

Mr Scott, energize! Who says you can't fly in an armchair: **the Excite 5.1 system.** All there is.



DYNABOARD

'The YSP-2500 is a
supreme performer,
with an effortlessness
to its sound quality'



Reflecting on audio

CALLING THE SOUND that comes out of a regular soundbar 'surround sound' is like saying that watching the World Cup on TV is the same as being in the stadium. But, judging from marketing literature, it's a good selling feature.

Sound projectors, of course, are a different beast, using multiple drivers to direct sound beams off walls and ceilings. Over a decade ago the first such model went on sale from Pioneer, a massive coffin-sized unit priced at an eye-watering £25,000. Using technology invented by a Cambridge-based company called One Ltd, it was, unsurprisingly, a short-lived venture. However, Yamaha took up the baton and has been refining the art of sound projectors every since.

The YSP-2500, its latest offering, is an unqualified success aesthetically. It's a compact unit with a slight wedge-shaped footprint. Made from highly rigid aluminium, the 'bar looks and feels like a premium product. The design is simple and uncluttered, with minimal buttons and sockets on show. The central speaker array is flanked by a high-contrast display on one side and jacks for headphones and the calibration mic on the other. The internal structure and layout are designed for optimum sound dispersion.

Rear connections befit the price point, including HDMI ARC and three other HDMI inputs (offering 4K 50/60p passthrough, 3D and HDMI CEC). There's a line-out for hooking up to the subwoofer, although many users will take the wireless approach for connecting to Yamaha's 130W bass bin. This, too, is neat and compact, and seems equally well built.

The soundbar is 51mm high when used without its puck feet, although it looks smarter on the low-profile appendages. It can, of course, be wall mounted.

The supplied remote control is nicely laid out but it's a shame it can't learn to operate a TV, nor is it backlit. It's complemented by a neat iOS/Android app that allows you to set a target mode, narrowing the soundfield to any specific position in the room. Useful when watching TV on your tod.

Intelligent setup

To get started with the YSP-2500, you plug in the supplied calibration microphone and let Yamaha's IntelliBeam system work its magic. This measures the layout of your room and >

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Digital sound projector

POSITION:
Yamaha's current top-flight model

PEERS:
Bowers & Wilkins Panorama 2;
Monitor Audio ASB-2;
Bose Cinemate 1 SR

An iOS/Android app is another control option



The soundbar incorporates 16 drivers managed by Yamaha's IntelliBeam processing



The YSP-2500 impresses with its connectivity

adjusts various parameters (including beam angles and frequency response) to suit. You can check the results using the rather chunky-looking onscreen menu and manually tweak the levels and distances, but I didn't feel the need to make any changes. The remote control allows you to save three different room settings, which could be handy for personal preferences or daytime/nighttime options.

The front panel display is almost redundant in that most information is too small to see from a typical viewing distance, so you'll resort to using the onscreen info to check modes, input signals, etc. All the main display is really good for is seeing which input is in use.

The YSP-2500 can decode DTS-HD MA and Dolby TrueHD bitstreams, and is aptX compatible on the Bluetooth front. What you do with the source is up to you. There are six Beam modes to experiment with, including 5 Beam+2 for watching movies, 3 Beam, which is suitable for widening the listening area to listen to music, and Stereo+3 Beam, which is designed for music videos. You can let the unit select the surround mode automatically according to the incoming signal if you want.

Bar for all eventualities

The YSP-2500 is a supreme performer, with an effortlessness to its sound quality that instantly allows you to engage with whatever you're watching.

It's particularly adept when it comes to dealing with dialogue. One of my toughest test discs is a DVD of the classic BBC series *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, recorded in 1979, much of it in noisy locations with awful acoustics. The YSP-2500 simply transforms the audio, reducing its inherent brightness and delivering voices that are clear and resonant. When Smiley arrives at a country house in the rain the water dripping from an overflowing gutter is clear and seems to emanate from the side rather than masking the dialogue. It's a clean-up job that would make MI5 envious.

With multichannel soundtracks, the auto setting is a reliable way of selecting the most

suitable mode but the soundscape sometimes seems less defined by directionality than I would expect. Effects do, however, ping out distinctly in terms of clarity and resolution. The flying fish in *Life of Pi* woosh nicely around your head and there's a satisfying texture to the soundfield that's simply absent on a TV's speakers. Highly impressive is the tiger's roar, which is meatier here than a Texan barbecue.

The subwoofer proves its chops when the submarine explodes under the sea in *The LEGO Movie*, building to a well executed boom. And when Emmet gets dragged off to the Old West, the YSP-2500 does a fine job of serving up the horses' neighs and clopping hooves, with the sub's punchiness underpinning Batman's 'I call them my dogs!' bellow.

Yamaha's svelte duo relishes scenes with a musical score. Throughout the dynamic range, instruments seem well defined and have a presence that's perfectly matched to the dialogue and effects.

With stereo music material the imaging is broad and coherent. Close your eyes and you may think you're listening to a pair of monitor speakers driven by a more powerful amplifier.

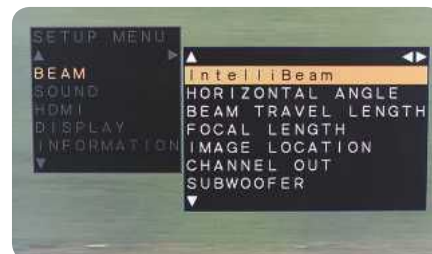
The YSP-2500 is a triumph of refinement over power. In a small or medium-sized room it produces a comfortably immersive output. You can crank it up to dust-shifting levels but it becomes tiring. Your own ears will intervene before the neighbours get on to the council.

Within each Beam setting you have the option of choosing one of 10 DSP modes. By emphasising or downplaying certain frequencies they often prove suitable – Sports mode, for instance, boosts commentary and spreads the sound of the crowd.

Approaching brilliance

Yamaha's YSP-2500 is not quite perfect in terms of user-friendliness, but its performance is nothing short of brilliant. Its success in creating genuine surround sound will depend a lot on the environment in which it is used but the clarity, smoothness and refinement of the sound is never in doubt ■

ON THE MENU



→ Not the snazziest of onscreen displays, but buyers should find it easy to use. It will also be regularly employed, as the front-panel info screen is tricky to read from a distance

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 16 x 1.1in beam drivers
AMPLIFICATION: 32W (16 x 2W) + 130W subwoofer

CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI inputs; HDMI out (ARC); stereo phono; digital coaxial; digital optical x 2; subwoofer line out

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: Yes/Yes

SEPARATE SUB: Wireless/wired 130W subwoofer

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS: 944(w) x 73(h) x 144(d)mm (on feet)

WEIGHT: 4kg

FEATURES: IntelliBeam room calibration; Clear Voice; Bluetooth audio streaming with aptX; iOS/Android app control; subwoofer 50Hz to 150Hz frequency response; front speakers 150Hz to 22kHz; TV remote repeater function; Audio Delay Control; 4K and 3D passthrough; DSP modes (Sci-Fi, Adventure, Spectacle, Music Video, Concert, Jazz Club, Sports, Talk Show, Drama, Game); Listening Modes (5 Beam, 5 Beam Plus2, Stereo+ 3 Beam, Stereo+ 3 Beam Plus2, 3 Beam, My Surround)



HCC VERDICT

Yamaha YSP-2500

→ £800 approx → www.uk.yamaha.com

→ 0844 811 1116

HIGHS: Neat design; good build quality; connectivity; convincing surround sound; HD audio decoding; superb sonic quality; versatile DSP modes

LOWS: Bluetooth metadata not shown on display; remote control not backlit/non-learning

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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*Air Studios models are SC-LX78 and SC-LX88 only

48 LG 55EC930V → Approx £2,000

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MONKEY BUSINESS

We go bananas
for *Dawn of
the Planet of
the Apes*, p94

OLED

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
55in curved
OLED TV

POSITION:
Joined by LG's
premium-priced
65in and 77in 4K
OLED displays

PEERS:
Samsung
UE55HU8500



Is LG's next-gen panel technology really the future of television? **Steve May** peers into the darkness...

OLED curves into the mainstream

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS, in LG's high-security Seoul HQ, dubbed The Twin Towers, there's a white board screaming the message '2015 is the year of OLED!' It's underlined three times in red marker. There's a smiley face drawn alongside.

And maybe for good reason – after years of ruinously expensive research and development, LG's Display division is on the verge of mainstream production of WRGB OLED panels. Between you and me, it intends to push hard with the technology over the next 12 months. You can't blame the boffins for being keen. Even LG's arch nemesis Samsung has stepped away from production because of technical complications, and what's left of the Japanese TV industry is watching circumspect from the sidelines. Unlike LED/LCD TVs, self-emissive OLED doesn't require a backlight, and the manufacturing process is actually simpler as fewer components are required. LG's latest M2 production facility can now produce 26,000 substrates a month, with each sheet generating enough glass for six 55in screens. A year ago, the brand was struggling to disgorge 8,000 per month.

The 55in EC930V is in many ways a forerunner to this big push. It's a Full HD panel with, by past OLED standards at least, a relatively affordable price tag. It's also the first OLED to offer LG's WebOS Smart platform.

A work of art

As a piece of cosmetic design, the 55EC930V is a wonder. The screen itself is so thin it feels positively fragile, even though it's reinforced with carbon fibre for much needed rigidity. Heck, even the back panel is artful. Finished in gloss black, it's largely devoid of grilles and screws. There's even cable cover to mask the rear-placed connections. The curving pedestal stand is equally glamorous, with a nice

glitter-flecked appearance and clear OLED branding, just to ram home its superiority.

Indeed, the panel is so thin, electronics and connectivity have to be worn almost like a backpack. Connections include four HDMI's (three side-facing) with ARC and MHL support, three USBs, an optical digital output and Ethernet jack. The set has both terrestrial and satellite tuners, although only one of each. There's also dual-band support for 2.4/5GHz Wi-Fi, plus Wi-Fi Direct.

Two remotes are bundled; a regular infra-red doofer and the latest version of LG's Bluetooth pointer. In addition to the usual raft of streaming services, the set offers media playback from networked storage as well as local USB. Video codec compatibility includes MKV, AVI, MPEG and WMV; audio support covers MP3, M4A, WAV and WMA.

So what of the OLED viewing experience? Does it really match the hype, and can an expensive Full HD set compete in a world of ever more affordable 4K/UHD?

When it comes to sheer dramatic impact, the EC930V certainly delivers. A perfect full black, rich colour fidelity and peak whites make for jaw-dropping images. This is a screen technology optimised for fireworks – the incredible dynamics of the 55EC930V are a constant delight. On this LG, the home screen of my Oppo Blu-ray player pops in a way I've never seen before. Even the menus have incredible visual snap! Take my money OLED, I'm yours.

When you're watching a letterboxed movie, the bars top and bottom are perfectly inky with >

Magic Remote features include a UI pointer and voice control





zero light spillage. Home cinema heaven! OLED is like plasma, only more so.

But the panel technology is reminiscent of plasma in other ways, too. There's a tendency toward pixel fizz, which can become quite pronounced on some movie material where cinematic grain (be it real or digital), can suffer serious over-emphasis – look for it on the Blu-ray of *Transformers: Age of Extinction*. The ISF presets detune this quite successfully.

With Sky HD and Blu-ray, fine detail is generally excellent. While 4K would be nice, this 1080p 55-incher offers an often

'When it comes to sheer dramatic impact, LG's curved OLED screen certainly delivers'

astonishingly dense image. OLED is deceptive, though. Pure black aside, there's no more shadow detail on display here than you'll find on any well turned-out LED screen. Overall screen brightness can even seem dull, most evidently when asked to display a lot of white. That characteristic peak white sparkle is a delightful visual trick.

Blacks can also seem a little crushed, and correction is tricky. While you can nudge more shadow detail from the mid-point default, this causes unexpected side effects. When Uma Thurman is buried alive in *Kill Bill 2*, her incarceration is shot in such low light it actually causes some LCD TVs to momentarily switch off. Yet here, if you set brightness anywhere higher than mid-way, the low-level shadows in the scene glow as if radioactive, which is unlikely to be what Quentin Tarantino intended.

OLED is inherently fast, with a response time quoted at just 0.001ms compared to 5ms for LCD, but it still needs the help of picture processing trickery to retain fast-moving detail. Without LG's proprietary TruMotion image processing, this screen has a subjective

horizontal motion resolution of less than 900 lines. Engage the Smooth or Clear settings, though, and you'll immediately reinstate detail up to 1080. Clear delivers the most pleasing image, with negligible artefacting. Smooth suffers a little from smudgy displacement seen around certain moving objects.

With TruMotion turned off, the shaky-cam style of Paul Greengrass can take on an occasionally unsettling blurry quality in *Captain Phillips*. When pirates board Tom Hank's ship you could feel distinctly queasy for all the wrong reasons. The image appears more ship-shape when the TruMotion setting is set to Clear. There's also a User mode with variable de-judder and de-blur. I found the best results came with de-blur set to zero.

The radius of LG's curve is rather benign and as a consequence it doesn't overtly irritate. Equally, it doesn't contribute anything significant to the viewing experience. This is design artifice, pure and simple.

Stereoscopic viewing is excellent. There's no overt double imaging from LG's Passive tech, giving clean, deep immersion. Of course, there's a noticeable resolution loss, this being a 1080p screen. Still, the 3D can really be a lot of fun. The opening sequence from *The Adventures of Hercules* pulls you up through a cloud of swords and helmets, and threads your eyeballs through knotted oars and on to the battle-steeped beaches of Argos. Arrows, flaming missiles and more zip toward you on every trajectory. It's impossible not to momentarily flinch at the near misses.

Harbinger of change?

Overall, the LG EC930V is an intriguing proposition, offering a level of depth and vibrancy that hasn't been seen before. If you're looking for eye-candy you'll find it in spades. There are several image caveats, and the relatively high price pitches it against some very impressive 4K LED panels, but as the harbinger of change it leaves us eager to see more. 4K OLED is looking like the promised land, and smaller, more affordable panels than LG's current 65in/77in beasts will surely come ■

ON THE MENU



→ The 55EC930V is LG's first OLED display to feature the WebOS Smart platform and menu system. Intuitive and slick, it's a treat to use

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Passive

4K: No. 1,920 x 1,080

TUNER: Freeview; DVB-S (satellite)

CONNECTIONS: 4x HDMI; 3x USB; Ethernet; optical digital output; component video input; composite video input; Scart; headphone jack; RS232; CI slot; built-in Wi-Fi

SOUND: 40W

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A

CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): N/A

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,225 (w) x 715 (h) x 80 (d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 14.4kg

FEATURES: Dual-band Wi-Fi; LG Smart+ WebOS with catchup and streaming services; Magic Remote; USB recording; WiDi; Miracast; Wi-Fi Direct; DLNA/USB file playback; Triple XD Engine; Tru Color generator; Vivid, Standard, Cinema, Game, Photo, ISF Expert1 and ISF Expert2 presets

HCC VERDICT



LG 55EC930V

→ £2,000 Approx → www.lg.com/uk

→ Tel: 0344 847 5454

HIGHS: Lush, vibrant images; perfect pure black; WebOS smart platform; ultra-thin design
LOWS: Sparkles aside it's not overly bright; curved screen divisive; single tuners limit interaction; Full HD resolution

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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52 MONITOR AUDIO RADIUS R270HT12 → £2,350 approx



Danny Phillips spends yet more quality time with Monitor Audio's Radius range

Taking it to the next level

HAVING RECENTLY SCOOPED our Best Compact Speaker Package of the Year for its brilliant R90HT1 sub/sat system, Monitor Audio is on a bit of a roll, and now the UK brand has launched an updated version that substitutes the Radius 390 sub for the bigger and beefier Silver W12, and introduces the Radius 270 floorstanders on front L/R duty.

But why tinker with a winning formula? Well, good though the Radius 390 woofer is, Monitor Audio always felt that the Radius 90 satellites, 270 floorstanders and 200 centre are capable enough to be paired with subwoofers higher up the brand's range – particularly as they now incorporate C-CAM drivers.

'The fact that the Radius 90, 200 and 270 now come with a C-CAM driver for the first time means that there is better timbre matching and integration between them and the latest generation of Silver W12 than ever before,' says Alex Brady of Monitor Audio. 'The R270HT12 system is also more adept at filling larger listening environments.'

Monitor Audio never fails to impress me with its graceful, elegant designs and the R270HT12 is no exception. Pull the R270s from their boxes and the see-your-face-in-it black lacquer finish brings an instant smile, while the bulbous grilles and thin silver trim are classy details. The system is also available in Walnut real-wood veneer and High Gloss White, but black is by far the sexiest.

Up close the R270 cabinets are beautifully engineered, with hefty, seamless construction and curved edges that give them the impression of being a single solid block. They sit on thick plinths with a pair of gold-plated binding posts

on the back. As floorstanders go they're slim and unobtrusive, measuring 177mm wide.

The two-way, rear-ported R90s are basically scaled-down versions of the R270s, clad in the same lacquer finish, and easy to accommodate. Likewise the R200 centre, which sits on its side for snug placement on an AV stand.

Reworked drivers

Monitor Audio's C-CAM (Ceramic-Coated Aluminium/Magnesium) drivers are at the heart of this system, and have been retooled to incorporate new developments in cone geometry and drive mechanisms.

The R270's two 4in C-CAM bass drivers are coupled to a longer voice coil and larger motor than before – the benefits of which, according to Monitor Audio, are greater drive force, longer excursions, lower distortion and improved

integration with the sub. Similar care has been taken to enhance the performance of the 1in C-CAM tweeter, which vents internally to a rear chamber through a specially designed housing, resulting, says MA, in lower resonance and a more accurate crossover.

The R200 employs dual bass drivers, flanking the tweeter, while the compact R90 surrounds pack a single woofer.

Despite hailing from a different range altogether, the Silver W12 fits >

AV INFO

PRODUCT: 5.1-channel floorstanding speaker package

POSITION: Step up from the £1,500 R90HT1 compact system

PEERS: Dynaudio Excite; Tannoy Mercury Vi; JBL Studio 2

Monitor Audio's 5.1 package adds the Silver series sub to its Radius speakers



in surprisingly well. It's bigger than the Radius 390 but otherwise this cube-shaped bass bin is pretty much identical aesthetically, and helpfully comes in the same sumptuous lacquer and wood finishes.

Spec-wise it's a clear step up, though, with a 500W DSP-controlled amplifier in the sealed cabinet driving a front-firing 12in C-CAM woofer. On the back are stereo/LFE input and output, plus crossover and phase controls. There are Movie, Music and Impact bass EQ modes to experiment with.

Optimising a subwoofer can be a tricky business but the built-in Automatic Position Correction (APC) system works to do it for you. Rig up the supplied microphone, run the test tones and the W12 tracks down problems and automatically corrects the frequency response for your room. The APC controls and volume dial are helpfully placed on top to save you fumbling around in hard-to-reach places.

It's worth putting into action, as I felt bass performance tightened up considerably after running the room EQ system.

Monkey business

Once I had the woofer working in harmony with my room, I unleashed *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* on Blu-ray and understood immediately why Monitor Audio was keen to combine the W12 with the Radius speakers. This super sub offers greater clout and presence than the Radius 390, but still manages to meld beautifully with the full, confident sound of the R270s and R90s. It's a match made in heaven.

Shots of the apes chasing deer through their forest home are accompanied by thick waves of LF as their footsteps hit the ground. The rumble is solid and voluminous, but the W12's top-notch detail and agility means you can pick out hooves hitting the deck amid the stampede.

I upped the stakes and switched to my much-spun *Pacific Rim* Blu-ray. The first battle between Gipsy Danger and Knifehead is as electrifying as it should be – every time the Jaeger slams its fist into the Kaiju or stomps on the sea bed, huge bass notes flood the room. The scale is phenomenal.

But here's the best part – integration between the W12 and the speakers is so slick that you're rarely reminded of the sub's presence. It's a cohesive union – testament to the deep bass reach of the C-CAM drivers – which keeps your mind on the movie, not on the woofer's volume level. That even applies when the action quietsens down, lending depth to the score and the hum inside the hangar.

But the R270HT12 isn't all about that bass, no matter what Meghan Trainor says. Monitor Audio's speakers once again impress with their finesse and clarity in the high frequencies.

Switching back to the start of *...Apes*, as the simians stalk through the woods, the falling rain has a wonderfully light, crisp quality. It sounds real, basically. And as they clamber up trees and creep along the forest floor, the delicate rustle amid the stillness is captivating.

Sure, other speakers are detailed, but what makes this so enjoyable is how natural it all sounds. It never spits or pushes too hard, even when you crank the volume dial. And this clarity permeates every aspect of the soundtrack, from vocal details (human or ape) to the precise, absorbing surround effects.

On the flipside, I occasionally wished the R270HT12 offered a bit more brutality during some of these frenetic action scenes. Listening to its smooth sound, I got the feeling the system is struggling to escape the shackles of Monitor Audio's musical background. These Radius cabinets simply can't match the sheer muscularity and midrange aggression of born-and-bred movie systems.

What this does mean, though, is that the array sounds terrific with tunes. With its punchy bass, clear mids and expressive treble, you get a warm, well-balanced, nuanced sound. The spacey pop-funk of Roxy Music's *More Than This* (SACD) is fabulous, with tight drums, sizzling percussion and silky sax lines.

So on balance is the R270HT12 a worthwhile upgrade over the R90HT1? Most definitely. The Silver W12 subwoofer beefs up the low-end to new levels, underpinning the elegant sound from the slender Radius speakers, and using the R270 floorstanders rather than bookshelves brings extra presence to the front soundstage. Get an audition if you want both style and substance ■

SPECIFICATIONS

RADIUS 270

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 4in C-CAM cone mid/bass drivers; 1 x 1in C-CAM gold dome tweeter

ENCLOSURE: Bass reflex

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 50Hz-35kHz

SENSITIVITY: 87dB

POWER HANDLING: 150W

DIMENSIONS: 177(w) x 1,000(h) x 208(d)mm

WEIGHT: 9.9kg

RADIUS 200

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 4in C-CAM cone mid/bass drivers; 1 x 1in C-CAM gold dome tweeter

ENCLOSURE: Bass reflex

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 60Hz-35kHz

SENSITIVITY: 86dB

POWER HANDLING: 150W

DIMENSIONS: 330(w) x 125(h) x 140(d)mm

WEIGHT: 3.6kg

RADIUS 90

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 4in C-CAM cone mid/bass driver; 1 x 1in C-CAM gold dome tweeter

ENCLOSURE: Bass reflex

FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 80Hz-35kHz

SENSITIVITY: 83dB

POWER HANDLING: 100W

DIMENSIONS: 125(w) x 198(h) x 140(d)mm

WEIGHT: 2.1kg

SILVER W12 (SUBWOOFER)

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 12in C-CAM woofer

ENCLOSURE: Sealed

LOW FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 40Hz-120Hz

ON BOARD POWER: 500W

REMOTE CONTROL: No

DIMENSIONS: 340(w) x 340(h) x 380(d)mm

WEIGHT: 20.1kg

CONNECTIONS: LFE input and output; stereo line input and output

HCC VERDICT

Monitor Audio R270HT12

→ £2,350 approx → www.monitoraudio.co.uk

→ 01268 740589

HIGHS: Beautifully detailed sound; big soundstage from slim speakers; thunderous bass; watertight cohesion; gorgeous design; subwoofer auto setup

LOWS: Plenty of competition at this price point; smooth rather than aggressive

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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Soundbase showdown

Danny Phillips makes space underneath his TV for a quartet of soundbase speakers ranging in price from £200 to £450



CANTON DM 75

Three-way design promises audio refinement

ROTH NEO 6.2 SOUNDCORE

HDMI switching is just part of a strong spec list

SAMSUNG HW-H600

Easy on the eye and easy on your wallet

YAMAHA SRT-1000

Beam tech aims to create surround sound thrills

Canton DM 75

The German brand's DM 50 set a standard for soundbases – this bigger model follows suit



CANTON'S DM 50, reviewed last year, is perhaps best used with TVs around the 48in mark; the step-up DM 75 on test here supports screens up to 60in (or up to 40kg in weight). Bigger screens need a bigger sound and the DM 75's roomier cabinet should provide the extra oomph you're looking for.

Its run-of-the-mill black box design is more functional than fancy, but it exudes a quiet elegance that'll go down well in most living rooms.

The DM 75's real beauty lies in its build quality. The impenetrable HDF cabinet is rigid and robust, which will pay dividends in terms of sound quality. The black metal mesh and semi-gloss top panel are further examples of a classy construction.

Behind the mesh is a blue LED display showing selected inputs and volume levels. It's bright but thankfully disappears when idle. The lack of buttons on the front preserves the unit's minimalist look.

Connections

For such a pricey soundbase, the DM 75's lack of HDMI sockets must count as a disappointment. There are optical and coaxial inputs, analogue input and a subwoofer output, but like the Yamaha SRT-1000 elsewhere in this roundup you can't use it as an HDMI switcher – something a lot of people are looking for from a soundbase or 'bar.

The DM 75's modest feature list includes Bluetooth with aptX, Dolby Digital decoding and DTS TruSurround processing. But the most eye-catching thing on the spec sheet is the driver array. Unlike most soundbases, which might throw in some full-range drivers and a couple of subs, the DM 75 offers a three-way design with two 0.75in fabric tweeters, two 2in midrange drivers and a quartet of 4in woofers. Driven by a 200W amplifier, the DM 75 looks like it's primed for serious sonic devastation.

First though, you'll need to tweak the sound settings. You can adjust bass and treble levels and choose between three EQ modes for different installation positions – free-standing, with a TV on top, or inside a rack.

Making these adjustments is a doddle thanks to the top-drawer remote. Its nine

'The DM 75's sound reaches a level of sophistication you simply don't expect from a soundbase'

chunky buttons cover all bases, while the silver styling will look good on your coffee table.

Performance

In terms of performance the DM 75 is in a different league to its rivals. It's powerful, assertive and remarkably refined – all the ingredients for a hugely entertaining listen.

The four woofers easily fill the room, making *Pacific Rim*'s bass-heavy sequences sound huge. You won't feel the need to use that subwoofer output.

But this isn't just a shapeless, resonant rumble – bass is taut, full-bodied and detailed, responding to every beat with impressive agility. It keenly attacks explosions and stops without overhang.

Integration with the midrange driver array is seamless, resulting in a cohesive soundstage. It attacks effects with a snappy, but composed, tone.

Yet perhaps the most impressive aspect of the DM 75's performance is its ability to tease out fine high-frequencies. Frankly, in this regard, it's head and shoulders above its groupiest competition. The three-way design comes up trumps here – the tweeters resolve

treble beautifully, leading to a natural and textured sound. It picks out the fizzing top edge of crashing waves in *Pacific Rim* and small inflections in dialogue.

Flicking between the Stereo and Surround sound modes reveals a slight boost in soundstage width but it's not entirely convincing.

The DM 75 is a surprisingly good Bluetooth music player too, making the most of its three-way driver complement and aptX support. It digs out details that go missing on lesser soundbases and renders basslines with great agility.

Verdict

So, Canton's soundbase may not be the most attractive or feature-packed of the four auditioned here, but it is by far the best performer sonically. Thanks to its three-way speaker design, its sound reaches a level of sophistication you simply don't expect from a soundbase – it's detailed, powerful and exciting, but always easy on the ear. The only letdown is the lack of HDMI connectivity, which many will have expected at this price. And its £450 price tag is hardly pocket change, either.

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 2in midrange drivers; 2 x 0.75in fabric tweeters; 4 x 4in woofers

AMPLIFICATION: 200W

CONNECTIONS: Optical digital input; coaxial digital input; analogue stereo input; subwoofer output

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No/No

SEPARATE SUB: No

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS: 725(w) x 69(h) x 320(d)mm

WEIGHT: 7.75kg

FEATURES: Bass and treble control; Dolby Digital decoder; DTS TruSurround virtual processing; Lip Sync adjustment; 3 x EQ setup modes

Roth Neo 6.2 SoundCore

One of the best-looking models around, but is there more here than flash styling? Yes, actually



ROTH IS A soundbase debutante, and takes to the stage with the impressively-specced Neo 6.2 SoundCore. The name's a bit of a mouthful but those numbers relate to the number of speaker drivers on board – six full-rangers and two downward-firing subs.

Roth has livened up the soundbase design with a snazzy silver finish that forms a striking contrast with the black cloth grille. It has a faintly retro feel that I rather like. An all-black version is available if that's a better match for your TV. A silver strip on the corner plays host to standby, source and volume keys.

Annoyingly there's no LED readout on the front, just a small light that glows different colours and blinks whenever you adjust volume. It's barely visible from the sofa and doesn't make life easy when you want to tweak the bass and treble.

At 93mm high, this is a sizable proposition. Yet it feels supremely sturdy, too, happily supporting my 55in TV. Roth says it's designed to accommodate screens from 32in to 60in.

Connections

The SoundCore excels when it comes to connectivity. The rear panel plays host to four HDMI inputs, the most I've ever seen on a soundbase speaker, and one ARC-compatible output. They passthrough 3D and 4K signals, too, making this an ideal switcher for your home cinema kit.

If you'd rather use your TV as the hub, you can hook it up to the Roth's optical input or use the ARC connection. And with coaxial, analogue phono and 3.5mm minijack inputs, adding other source equipment is simple. There's even a subwoofer output should you wish to bolster the bass performance.

On the wireless side you'll find Bluetooth with CD-quality aptX streaming and NFC one-touch pairing of Android devices.

The six full-range drivers are supplied with 10W each, while the subs get 20W. Audio jiggery pokery comes courtesy of Sonic Emotion processing, which creates a '3D sound image'. This comes in three flavours – Music, Movie and News.

Too many soundbases throw cheap, nasty bubble-button remotes in the box, but not Roth. It's gone all-out on a slender, weighty zapper with a brushed silver finish and chunky, clearly-labelled rubber buttons. Nice.

Performance

So far so good, but the Roth is a bit of a mixed bag sonically. On the positive side, it delivers a lively, attacking sound that brings the breathless action fare of *Pacific Rim* to life. Monster claws rip into metal with a forceful crunch and the sound of toppling buildings is rich and forceful. Thankfully it plays these sounds without making you wince, only straining when you push the volume beyond sensible listening levels.

Dialogue has no trouble fighting its way through the cacophony and the SoundCore's full-range drivers dig out more detail than I was expecting – although the lack of dedicated tweeters ultimately means it's not quite as insightful as the Canton DM 75.

The Movie flavour of the Roth's Sonic Emotion processing is worth activating. I found it brought an open feel to the soundstage, moving effects with greater width and making everything sound fuller.

We'd be toasting a major triumph right about now but for one crucial drawback – an underwhelming bass output.

Although the sound of the Roth is deeper and punchier than practically every TV on the market, the built-in woofers don't quite hit the spot when playing the bass-heavy battle scenes of the Guillermo del Toro sci-fi. The

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 6 x full-range; 2 x subwoofers

AMPLIFICATION: 100W

CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI inputs; HDMI output (ARC); optical digital input; coaxial digital input; analogue stereo input; 3.5mm minijack input; subwoofer output

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No/No

SEPARATE SUB: No

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS: 650(w) x 350(h) x 93(d)mm

WEIGHT: 8kg

FEATURES: Bluetooth with aptX; NFC device pairing; Sonic Emotion 3D DSP; Music, Movie and News presets; 3D and 4K passthrough

stomping footsteps and big explosions lack depth and impact compared with other 'bases in this test.

The result is a slightly unbalanced sound, where mids and treble are too prominent. You can try levelling it up with the tone controls but even with bass on full whack there still isn't enough weight to truly satisfy.

It's worth noting, however, that Roth deliberately tuned the Neo in this way to avoid booming and bass fatigue, while endowing it with a subwoofer output to pacify bass fiends.

But given that the whole point of a soundbase is to boost TV sound without extra cost and clutter, we doubt many buyers will be keen to exercise this option.

On the plus side, having been tuned for 24/7 listening, the Roth works a treat with TV material, bringing extra presence to everything from the news to football matches.

Verdict

The Neo is a valiant effort from Roth, offering a stylish design, loads of sockets and generous features, but unless you're willing to add a subwoofer you might find its audio performance somewhat underwhelming.

Samsung HW-H600

This £200 slim-line soundbase packs more of a bass punch than you might imagine



AT 35MM HIGH, Samsung's first ever soundbase (or 'SoundStand' as the Korean corp calls it) is one of the slimmest on the market, allowing it to slip virtually unnoticed under your flatscreen. It also steers clear from the typical design blueprint, opting for a more streamlined look with sleek angles and curves. The brushed top panel flows seamlessly into the angled fascia, which is adorned with a large, legible LED display.

Build quality is reasonably good, although a manual inspection reveals a plasticky feel to the casing. It's not a patch on the other three models, all of which feel more solid and hefty. That said, it claims to have no trouble supporting TVs up to 60in/35kg. Unfortunately, I didn't have such a monster telly to hand to put that claim to the test.

Connections

Rear connectivity is better than expected. There's an HDMI input and ARC-enabled output, which support 3D passthrough but not 4K.

Hooking up your TV to the optical input represents the most convenient method of inputting audio, although you'll bypass the built-in Dolby Digital and DTS decoding since most TVs only output PCM. A 3.5mm minijack input and USB port complete the line-up, the latter allowing you to play MP3, WMA, FLAC, AAC, WAV and OGG files – a rare talent among soundbases.

There's wireless connectivity, too, in the form of Bluetooth. The lack of NFC means you have to pair devices manually. Although often that actually proves easier to do...

Aligned to that is SoundConnect, which uses Bluetooth to beam sound to the soundbase from a compatible Samsung TV. Good for people with a cable phobia.

The HW-H600 is stuffed with other features, including a clutch of sound presets – Music, Voice, Sports and Cinema – plus Surround Sound Expansion, which attempts to widen the soundstage.

The speaker array comprises four mid-range drivers and two built-in subwoofers.

In action the HW-H600 is easy to use thanks to the clear, informative LED display and full-size remote. Button placement is spot-on and the dedicated keys for subwoofer volume and sound modes make it simple to tweak performance on the fly.

Performance

Although it doesn't bring the thunder like some of its peers, the HW-H600 still produces a louder and bassier noise than you might expect given its slender dimensions. With *Pacific Rim* the Samsung's dual woofers put in an admirable performance, underpinning the all-important battle scenes with a hearty rumble. As massive robots and monsters lumber about the screen you get a feel for their size and heft.

A touch of overhang restricts the overall punch and clarity of those bass notes, which can leave it sounding muddy. However, given how much low-frequency fun Samsung has squeezed out of this wafer-thin speaker I'll cut it a little slack.

Of greater concern are the HW-H600's mid and high frequencies. Samsung's sonic character is overtly bright and crisp (regardless of the sound preset), which guarantees a dynamic, exciting sound for day-to-day TV listening and iTunes-purchased pop songs, but it can sound hard when tested with screeching monsters and metal hitting metal. Crank up the volume and these cinematic effects become a chore to listen to.

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 4 x midrange drivers; 2 x subwoofers

AMPLIFICATION: 80W

CONNECTIONS: HDMI input; HDMI output (ARC); optical digital input; 3.5mm minijack input; USB port

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No/No

SEPARATE SUB: No

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS: 735(w) x 36.5(h) x 360(d)mm

WEIGHT: 5kg

FEATURES: Bluetooth with NFC; Standard, Music, Voice, Sports and Cinema presets; Surround Sound Expansion; MP3, WMA, FLAC, AAC, WAV, OGG playback; 3D passthrough; TV SoundConnect; Dolby Digital/DTS decoding

The HW-H600 also lacks the finesse and love of treble detail offered by the Canton DM 75 (in particular), although that's hardly surprising given it's twice the price.

The Surround Sound Expansion mode does a good job of opening up the soundstage and making dialogue clearer (despite its complete lack of anything resembling surround sound) and for that reason I recommend leaving it switched on – movies sound flat without it.

This soundbase is much more at home with TV programmes where the bright, lively tone is a blessing. Speech comes through clearly and the meaty low-end lends depth to theme tunes and roaring sports crowds.

Verdict

Bluntly, the HW-H600 is the least impressive soundbase in this group test, but Samsung should be commended for coaxing a surprisingly weighty sound from such a slender speaker. And at around £200 (or even less), it's also the cheapest model of the four, which could count for a lot when making a decision. ➤

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Yamaha SRT-1000

This soundbase wants to cocoon you in 5.1 frolics. And you should certainly let it try



NOT ONLY IS the SRT-1000 Yamaha's first soundbase, but it's also the first to promise 'true' surround sound, using technology found on the company's high-end digital sound projectors (see p44 for our YSP-2500 review)

The cabinet houses eight 2.8cm drivers that, in simple terms, produce beams of sound that cannon off the walls and into your ears. These handle the surround channels, while the other drivers and dual subwoofers handle front, centre and LFE, resulting in a proper 5.1-channel experience – in theory, at least.

You don't need to see the badge to know this is a Yamaha product. The black finish, sleek lines and brushed top panel have the company's fingerprints all over them – literally, in the case of the gloss-black fascia.

Build quality is excellent, with a brick-like bodywork giving you absolute confidence to plonk your weighty screen on top (as long as it's lighter than 40kg). At 77mm high it's not the slimmest soundbase of our quartet, but it looks discreet enough.

Disappointingly, a row of lights is used in place of a full LED display, which makes operation more cryptic than it could be, particularly when trying to tweak the sound. They light up in various patterns for different settings, like some sort of hi-tech semaphore.

Connections

The lack of HDMI sockets means the SRT-1000 can't be used as a hub for all your hi-def home cinema gear like the Roth SoundCore, which is disappointing at this price. However, the provision of one coaxial and two optical digital inputs lets you connect hardware directly and take advantage of built-in Dolby Digital and DTS decoding.

The line-up is completed by an analogue input and subwoofer output.

Surround sound technology is the SRT-1000's key feature. The beam drivers can be

'The Yamaha offers an unusual amount of control. Built-in test tones let you tweak each channel'

configured for your room layout using three preset buttons on the remote, which adjust its performance according to the unit's proximity to the walls.

Yamaha's HT Controller smartphone app gives you even more flexibility, allowing you to enter the position and room size by swiping your finger around the onscreen graphic. But there's no mic-assisted setup.

Other features are built-in aptX Bluetooth and a range of Cinema DSP surround modes, including Movie, Music, Sports, Game and TV Program, and Clear Voice.

The supplied remote is fine thanks to its thoughtful button layout, but the SRT-1000 works best with the HT Controller app at the helm. The Yamaha offers an unusual amount of control over its performance. Built-in test tones let you tweak each channel, and there's a dedicated subwoofer volume on the remote.

Performance

Impressive is the word here. With a Blu-ray deck piping a DTS track into the optical input, *Pacific Rim*'s riotous melees are handled with a level of authority and immersion missing from the Roth and Samsung models.

The beam tech gets as close as possible to a 5.1 speaker system, firing effects deep into the room. Missiles, gunshots and falling debris pop and fizz with terrific width, making it feel like a bubble of sound. Naturally, it can

never match the accuracy of a genuine 5.1 setup, but just getting this close is a real achievement.

That said, the technology is fussy. It took lots of trial and error, and even experimenting in different rooms, to hear the system working properly. Yamaha even lays out a long list of reasons why it might not work in the manual. If your room's too wide or there are obstacles in the way, you'll come unstuck.

But even if it doesn't work, all is not lost. The Yamaha's huge, punchy bass output, attacking tone and clear detail make you feel involved in the action anyway.

Bass notes are deep and well-controlled (provided you exercise restraint with the subwoofer controls), with a convincing scale.

A word of caution though – avoid the Music preset, which compresses the sound and adds a distracting echo.

Verdict

Yamaha has lifted some of the tech that makes its YSP models so effective and put it to good use here, in a nicely-styled enclosure with excellent app control. Performance is very accomplished – just don't expect a 5.1 miracle.

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 8 x 2.8cm beam drivers; 2 x 4cm x 10cm woofers; 2 x 8.5cm subwoofers

AMPLIFICATION: 136W

CONNECTIONS: 2 x optical digital inputs; coaxial digital input; analogue stereo input; subwoofer output

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No/No

SEPARATE SUB: No

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS: 780(w) x 77(h) x 370(d)mm

WEIGHT: 8.8kg

FEATURES: 5.1 surround sound; CINEMA DSP Movie and Music; Bluetooth; UniVolume; Dolby Digital/DTS decoding; HT Controller app

Final standings

SOUNDBARS HAVE REVOLUTIONISED home cinema with their simple, clutter-free designs, but they're not for everyone. Many people still can't accommodate one near their TV – let alone find room for the subwoofer that usually comes with it. A soundbase solves that problem by allowing you to place your TV on top, occupying the same footprint. That way you get rich, powerful audio without stealing shelf space. It's no wonder these things are selling like hot cakes, and why every speaker brand worth its salt wants a slice of the market.

Bringing up the rear in our roundup is Samsung's HW-H600, which defies its skinny dimensions with a big, bassy sound, but ultimately it lacks the poise and polish of the competition. Samsung should be commended, however, for its smart design and generous features (music playback via USB, HDMI sockets...), which, as the cheapest model in the test, make it terrific value for money. If you're on a budget, it's well worth considering.

In many ways, Roth's Neo 6.2 SoundCore is the best soundbase of the lot, offering no less than four HDMI inputs, a bevy of features and an arresting design. Its sound is also detailed and engaging.

But in one crucial way it's also the least impressive. Roth's restrained bass tuning means it lacks the room-filling power and scale of its rivals. You can add a subwoofer, but that means extra hardware and expense that

most soundbase buyers are trying to avoid. It's terrific for day-to-day TV viewing, but that's not enough to save Roth from third place.

Tussles at the top

Just missing out on first place – but only just – is Yamaha's SRT-1000. It's the only model here that comes close to delivering 'real' surround sound, creating a wide and deep soundstage with beam drivers pinging effects off the walls. It's backed up by strong low frequencies, crisp detail, clear dialogue and a rugged build quality, but we'd have liked HDMI connectivity for a simple life.

However, the victor in our soundbase showdown is the superb Canton DM 75. It says something when a model that offers no HDMI ports, limited features and a high price tag can claim top spot, but that's all thanks to its refined, potent and articulate sound quality ■

PLAYING WITH MEDIA PLAYERS



Embracing the online world: Once you've pimped your TV's sound with a soundbase speaker, perhaps it's time to give it a Smart makeover, too? True, many modern flatscreens have decent online hubs granting plenty of catchup TV, VOD, apps and games, but older models can still benefit from a leg up.

Rocking with a Roku: As well as the Amazon Fire TV (reviewed on p68), a media player that should be on your shortlist is Roku's Streaming Stick. This dinky device plugs directly into your TV's HDMI input (and draws power either from a wall socket or a TV's USB input) and can be controlled via a simple handheld remote or app. Roku supplies access to up to 500 'channels' (some subscription-based, some free). Key offerings include BBC iPlayer, Demand 5, Netflix, Now TV, YouTube, Spotify and TuneIn radio, but there are plenty more worth investigating. 1080p streaming is an option, while casting photos and video from your smartphone/tablet is a useful feature.

Now's the time for Now TV: Alternatively, consider Sky's Now TV add-on. Available for just £10, this borrows some design and hardware elements from Roku's own LT player, but limits access to some VOD services (including Netflix). It does, though, enable subscription viewing to Sky's movie, sport and entertainment content. Great if you're unable/unwilling to get a Sky dish.

HCC VERDICT



Canton DM 75

→ £450 Approx →

www.computersunlimited.co.uk

HIGHS: Outstanding detail and bass punch; smooth, composed sound; superb build quality; informative front display panel

LOWS: No HDMI connectivity; surround mode adds little; expensive compared to some rivals

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



Roth Neo 6.2 SoundCore

→ £350 Approx

→ www.rothaudio.co.uk

→ Tel: 01753 682782

HIGHS: Attractive silver design; four HDMI inputs; lots of features; loud, lively sound with good detail; luxurious remote

LOWS: Not enough bass extension; no front LED display

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



Samsung HW-H600

→ £200 Approx

→ www.samsung.co.uk

→ 0330 726 7864

HIGHS: Slim, attractive design to mirror your slim, attractive TV; USB music playback; impressive bass output; affordable price tag

LOWS: Bright, hard tone; strains at high volumes

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



Yamaha SRT-1000

→ £450 Approx

→ uk.yamaha.com

→ Tel: 0844 811 1116

HIGHS: Excellent build; sleek design; thumping bass output; good detail and dialogue clarity; surround sound mode

LOWS: No HDMI; surround sound not for all rooms; pricey

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Overall ★★★★★

Gentle giant of bass

This ported 12in subwoofer from SVS might be big and brutal in appearance, but **Ed Selley** discovers its performance is rather refined, too

AS A COMPANY, SVS has taken the 'no substitute for cubic capacity' maxim and flogged it to death. Then flogged it a bit more. The PB-2000 subwoofer is at the affordable end of its portfolio but it is still a huge piece of kit. The PB classification denotes a ported model, so as well as a 12in forward-firing driver, there is a 4in port working on the same axis. Now, no 12in woofer is ever going to be tiny, but at 55cm deep and over 50cm high, the PB-2000 is a bit of a whopper.

Internally, the PB-2000 uses the latest Sledge amplifier from the company and develops a healthy 500W. It's been designed specifically to match the driver, aluminium long-throw unit shared with the sealed-box SB-2000 version. When placed in this massive enclosure it gives a claimed low-end response of 17Hz at -3dB. For those of you not fussed by numbers, this translates to pretty damn low, and a couple of dB more subterranean than its sealed-box sibling.

After a trip to the gym...

As you might expect, installing such a thing is a full-body workout (although the packaging is well designed to aid extraction) but once in place, the PB-2000 responds entirely benignly to auto setup processes. And despite the presence of that chunky bass port, the SVS doesn't seem flummoxed when placed in a



The driver is married to SVS's 500W Sledge DSP amplifier

confined location. This is possibly to its advantage, as the PB-2000 is well-built but far from pretty, and the less said about the removable huge steel grill, the better.

Given its size and menacing appearance – and SVS's bass know-how – you might expect the PB-2000 to be

a bit of an unruly monster in use, but there is a little more to the performance than organ-rattling low-end.

With the beach invasion in *Edge of Tomorrow*, the SVS has no trouble in converting explosions into visceral and impressively deep bass that can be felt as much as heard. There is no sign of overhang or cabinet noise, and subsequently no question that the PB-2000 is a fine foil for action films.

Where this £740 sub is more of a surprise is in terms of how impressively subtle and refined it can be when you need a more nuanced performance. With the 24-bit/96kHz LPCM audio track of Pink Floyd's *The Endless River* (Blu-ray), the SVS is wonderfully smooth and manages to generate fulsome lower frequencies without ever becoming a distraction, able to integrate with pretty much any speaker with a sub-100Hz crossover in a way that is deliciously seamless. Bass is detailed, controlled and even at low listening levels has real impact to it.

This all-round ability makes the SVS something of a star. It can deliver the eyeball-crushing silliness of movie night without breaking sweat, while relishing the more laidback task of mid-week TV. If you have the space for it and you don't mind the rather brutalist appearance, the PB-2000 is a seriously talented subwoofer ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 12in 'high-output' bass driver
ENCLOSURE: Ported, front-firing
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 17Hz (-3dB)
ON-BOARD POWER: 500W Sledge DSP amplifier (1,100W peak)
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 439(w) x 531(h) x 559(d)mm
WEIGHT: 29.5kg
CONNECTIONS: LFE input; stereo line-level input; stereo line-level output

HCC VERDICT

SVS PB-2000

→ £740 Approx → www.karma-av.co.uk

→ Tel: 01423 358 846

HIGHS: Powerful sound; impressively refined; competitively priced; well built

LOWS: Rather bulky; not very attractive; only available in black

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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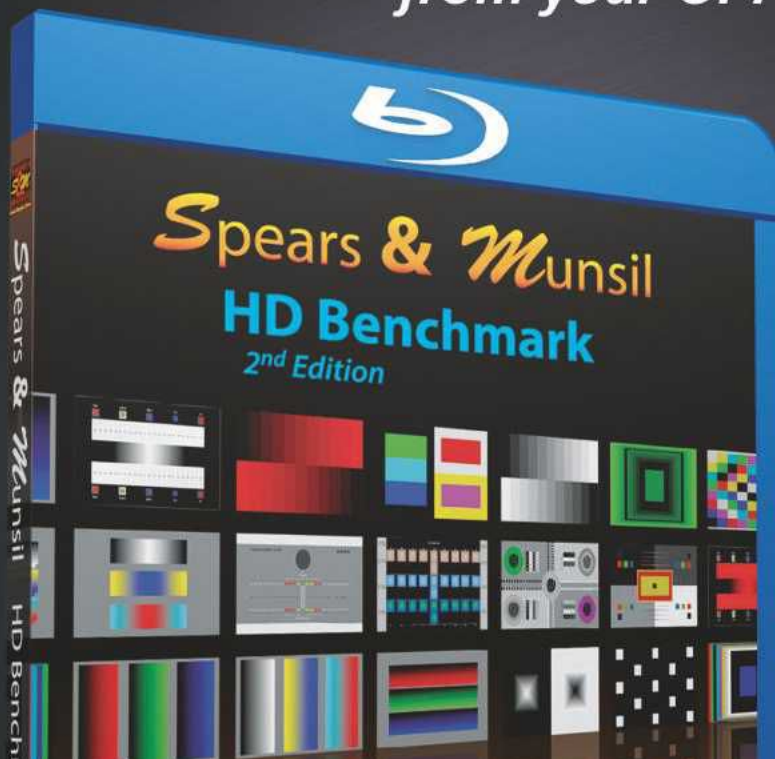
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**UP TO
THE TASK**

The Rock runs
amok as Hercules,
reviewed on
Blu-ray p98

Low-cost hi-res

Is Panasonic's entry-level 55in 4K flatscreen a great-value purchase or too stripped back for home cinema comfort? **John Archer** finds out

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
55in 4K TV
with Freetime

POSITION:
Panasonic's
entry-level 55in
4K TV, below the
AX802 series

PEERS:
Samsung
UE55HU7500;
Sony KDL-55X8505

AFTER A BIT of faffing about, Panasonic enters 2015 in pretty good shape from a 4K TV perspective. Its AX802 sets are now – following the belated addition of Netflix 4K streaming support – impressive mid-range options, while its recently released AX902 models do a credible job of simulating the sort of picture qualities previously associated with the brand's plasma screens.

We'll be looking at the AX902 in our next issue, but in the meantime it's the AX630 series that is on my test bench. Can Panasonic succeed where everyone else has failed in delivering an affordable 4K TV – the 55AX630 costs £1,200 – that's actually worth buying?

Thin is in

The TX-55AX630's design is minimalistic but effective. The screen is held within four extremely narrow edges. The top and bottom

flaunt a shiny silver finish while the left and right ones sport a neatly contrasting black. The 'barely there' chassis design extends to the desktop stand, which is essentially just a thin rectangular metal outline. All in all it's an appealing, airy design that certainly doesn't look in any way cheap.

All four of the TV's HDMI inputs are built to the v2.0 specification to support 4K playback at 50/60Hz. The set carries USB and SD card ports for direct playback of multimedia files, and inevitably you get Wi-Fi networking to provide DLNA media streaming and access to Panasonic's online Smart TV platform, here offering Freetime catch-up TV delivered via an excellent EPG.

There are plenty of other Smart attractions too, including a friendly, customisable interface. But there is one serious omission. This TV isn't equipped with HEVC H.265

decoding, meaning it can't play Netflix's 4K streams. Or, most likely, future 4K streaming services like the one teased by Amazon.

Inevitably, the TX-55AX630's picture quality features are less powerful than those found on Panasonic's step-up AX802 models. Yes, it's got the pre-requisite 3,840 x 2,160 pixel count, and provides 3D playback (assuming a TV can really be 3D Ready when, like the TX-55AX630, it doesn't ship with any 3D glasses...), but its LED lighting doesn't

'With the AX630 you will appreciate the benefits with whatever 4K content you can get your hands on'

benefit from any local dimming to boost contrast; motion reproduction is limited to a pseudo 1,200Hz system rather than the AX802's 2,000Hz; it doesn't use a wide colour gamut panel like its higher-priced siblings; and its video processing isn't driven by Panasonic's powerful Hexa Processing engine.

These assorted spec step-downs mean the TX-55AX630's images aren't on the same level as those of the AX802 models. This is no more than we'd expect. Much more relevant is how the flatscreen's pictures stack up within the context of its lower price. And in this light they fare rather well.

Get some content and go!

The set's clarity and colour finesse ensures that you can clearly appreciate the picture benefits of whatever 4K content you can get your hands on. The endless views across cities, valleys and ancient monuments that make up so much of the 4K demo content I employed for my audition (in the absence of Netflix 4K) all look clean, detailed and full of field depth in the way only 4K can.

Switching to 4K footage lensed at the 2014 World Cup reveals a loss of sharpness over moving objects that stands out more than it would on an HD TV due to 4K clarity elsewhere. It's not a major downer, though.

Upscaled HD Blu-rays and TV broadcasts aren't as impressive as they are on the AX802, or the likes of Samsung's 8000 series or Sony's X9s, for that matter. They look noticeably softer in particular. Not so much that they're not engaging to watch, but enough to mean that you won't feel nearly as well rewarded for your investment in a 4K screen as you will when you're gorging on native 4K.

But what of aspects of the TX-55AX630's pictures not directly related to its UHD nature? Well, the darkness of the scenes with Gollum in the first *Hobbit* flick show the Panasonic set to be a capable contrast performer. Deep black

levels share the screen with reasonable punchiness for brighter elements, like Bilbo's glowing sword and Gollum's twinkling eyes. I didn't encounter any serious problems with light clouding either, once I'd reined in the backlighting a little, and there's a healthy amount of shadow detail to be seen in the murky corners of Gollum's cave.

Colours look well balanced regardless of whether you're watching the stylised tones of *The Hobbit* or the much more naturalistic hues of something like *True Grit*, and pictures are generally free of noise even with images upscaled from relatively grainy, noisy Blu-rays, such as my well-worn copy of Zack Snyder's hack 'n' slash 300.

The only problem I have with the TX-55AX630's 2D pictures, further to the points I've already mentioned, is that while its colours contain plenty of subtlety, they feel a bit flat/short of vibrancy versus those of a number of other TV's I've seen recently.

Even so, the TX-55AX630's 2D pictures remain likeable for the money. Which is more than can be said for 3D ones, alas. The largescale spaces of 3D epics like *The Hobbit* and *Gravity* reveal Panasonic's 4K screen to be susceptible to crosstalk. Double image 'ghosting' appears quite clearly around objects and lines in the mid and far distance. This is especially unfortunate as it distracts from otherwise decent levels of sharpness and detail with its stereoscopic pictures, and makes 3D viewing a quite fatiguing experience.

I also noticed a few periods of lip-sync error while watching 3D material, which no amount of tweaking of the provided audio delay feature was able to fix.

And regarding audio, the Panasonic's svelte frame doesn't bode well for its sound quality – and it largely lives down to expectations, sounding compressed in the lower mid-range and bass parts of potent movie mixes. On the upside, the set retains quite a bit of treble detail even under duress, and sounds fine with relatively straightforward content.

Credible option

The 4K TV market is growing rapidly (compare the current situation to where we were just twelve months ago) and not everyone will be looking to splash out on a range-topping telly. Models such as the TX-55AX630, which eschews some features to hit a pleasing price point, will therefore appeal to many. And, overall, it's a credible 4K option, with picture strengths that outweigh the inevitable niggles.

That said, it's hard to give an unfettered recommendation to any 4K TV that doesn't support 4K streaming via an onboard decoder, given that this means it may be some months before owners of the TX-55AX630 have any alternative way of completely benefitting from the 4K resolution they've invested in ■

ON THE MENU



→ Another Panasonic TV, another tweakable My Home Screen interface and Freetime-powered catch-up TV portal. Control is via a standard handset or touchpad remote

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active

4K: Yes. 3,840 x 2,160

TUNER: Freeview HD

CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI; component video input; composite video input; RGB Scart input; optical digital audio output; headphone jack; Ethernet; built-in Wi-Fi; USB ports; SD card slot

SOUND: 20W (2 x 10W)

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A

CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): N/A

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,242(w) x 716(h) x 62(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 28kg

FEATURES: Smart system with Freetime catch-up TV/backwards EPG; My Home Screen customisable interface; myStream; 4K/60p support via HDMI 2.0; USB HDD recording; DLNA/USB/SD card media playback; 1,200Hz BLS; Dynamic, Normal, Cinema, True Cinema, Custom picture modes; touchpad remote with voice recognition

HCC VERDICT



Panasonic TX-55AX630

→ £1,200 Approx → www.panasonic.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 844 3899

HIGHS: Good 2D picture quality overall; attractive, space-saving design; good Smart features; decent value

LOWS: Crosstalk spoils the 3D experience; no Netflix 4K streaming support; colours feel a little washed out

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Amazon Fire TV is red hot

For Amazon Prime Instant Video subscribers there's no better media player available than this little box, says an impressed **Steve May**



and Curzon Home Cinema. You can always download more from Amazon's app store – the onboard memory is a relatively generous 2GB. Unfortunately there's no dedicated YouTube app and precious little in the way of catch-up TV.

Unlike the uniform Netflix user interface, Amazon's streaming service has many faces depending on the device being used, not all of them pretty. Here, though, it looks superb, with sharp attractive thumbnails and art.

Streaming success

Fire TV proves a fine source for an AV receiver. Multichannel audio, depending on the streamed content, can be delivered over HDMI or optical; Dolby Digital Plus is enabled by default. The UI, powered by a Qualcomm graphics engine, is gorgeous. Streaming image quality is potentially excellent, if you have fast broadband. With a fibre connection, HD movies and TV shows appear comparable to over-the-air broadcasts. Network connectivity includes wired Ethernet, as well as dual-band Wi-Fi.

Navigation is sprightly and casual games play well, thanks to a quad-core processor.

The Home page is thumbnail-driven. Recently watched items top the tree, followed by new additions to Prime Instant Video (for which you'll need a subscription) and Featured Apps and Games. Here you'll find optional apps (such as Plex for media player japes) and assorted diversions. Beneath this are various curated strands and recommendations. The more you buy into the Amazon ecosystem, the more Fire TV offers. MP3s in your Amazon Music locker stream with a cool graphical interface. Images stored in the Amazon Cloud Drive can also be browsed.

These latter tricks, along with the enjoyable interface, excellent voice interaction and simply-does-it installation, make Amazon Fire TV a superb media player for Prime Instant Video subscribers. Highly recommended ■

SPECIFICATIONS

CONNECTIONS: HDMI output; optical digital audio output; Ethernet; USB

FORMAT SUPPORT: Dolby Digital Plus; HDMI audio passthrough up to 7.1; MP3; H.263; H.264; MPEG-4; VCI; JPEG; PNG

DIMENSIONS: 115(h) x 115(w) x 17.5(d)mm

WEIGHT: 281g

FEATURES: Voice interaction; smartphone screen mirroring; Spotify; Tunein radio; optional game controllers; Qualcomm quad-core 1.7GHz processor, Adreno 320 GPU; dual-band Wi-Fi; 720p/1080p output up to 60fps

FASTER THAN AN Apple TV and thinner than a Roku, Amazon's Fire TV streaming player is a little box with big appeal. It's so good in fact, that it might make Prime Instant Video subscribers out of all of us.

The Bluetooth zapper is the star of the show. Simple yet oh-so slick, it features a circular navigation and menu control augmented by transport keys, plus an integrated microphone for voice interaction. Voice control is nothing new, but here it actually works. It can be used to search Amazon's streaming video service and proves remarkably effective. Film titles, actors, directors or genres, its accuracy rate is pretty much 100 per cent, and when it's not sure it offers up several likely suggestions. Of course, you can always opt for a text search if you want.

Setting up the Fire TV box takes just a few minutes. Obviously, as this is an Amazon ecosystem product, you'll need an Amazon account. But once connected, there's a range of diverse services available, including Netflix, BBC iPlayer

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

Smart upgrader/media player with voice interaction

POSITION:

Amazon's debut TV peripheral

PEERS:

Apple TV; Now TV; Roku 3

HCC VERDICT

Amazon Fire TV

→ £70 Approx → www.amazon.co.uk

HIGHS: Fast, attractive user interface; excellent voice search; high-quality video streaming (broadband permitting); deep integration with other Amazon music and photo services

LOWS: Limited catch-up; media streaming functionality dependent upon apps

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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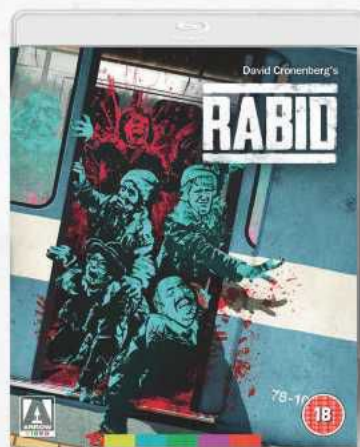
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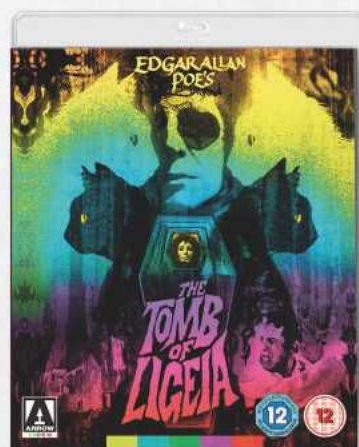
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American audio invasion

Polk Audio's speakers are now distributed in the UK by the company behind AV giants Denon and Marantz. **Danny Phillips** sees what the brand's affordable sub/sat array brings to the table



US BRAND POLK Audio attacks the UK compact speaker market with the TL1600, an affordable 5.1 pack bristling with innovation.

In the box are four *bijou* TL1 satellites that stand just 165mm high, plus a horizontally aligned centre speaker and a cute, cubed sub. The satellites' gloss finish and curved enclosures catch the eye, whereas as many sub/sat rivals in this market are resolutely boxy. And note that the non-parallel construction serves an acoustic purpose in reducing internal resonances.

Each satellite has a silk dome tweeter and a mid/bass driver (two for the centre), with the tweeter recessed in the front baffle as per Polk's Time Lens time alignment design. An acoustic lens in the tweeter's grille works to improve high-frequency characteristics, while an aperiodic rear-firing bass port controls air flow to boost bass response and help the sats blend with the subwoofer, which uses an 8in driver and 100W amp.

This all amounts to an impressive performance. Play *Godzilla* on Blu-ray and the Polk's crisp, lively presentation suits the gung-ho soundmix well. As the Army attacks the M.U.T.O. near Honolulu airport, the rattle of machine

guns is crisp and dynamic, while the sharp chug of helicopter blades whirls with panache. And big explosions don't just rumble – they're laced with a layer of treble that heightens impact.

It's a composed performer, but direct and bursting with detail. You'll appreciate the raspy edges of the brass lines in Alexandre Desplat's score, and the movements of debris and dust every time a building topples. Clarity is this system's key asset, giving the impression of refinement and openness.

And with identical satellites on front and surround duty you get that clarity, and accurate imaging, all around the soundstage. Well-defined effects fire at you purposefully from every angle, and front to back pans are smooth and decisive.

Woof woof

The smallscale subwoofer anchors the performance with big, natural-sounding low-frequencies. It's rated down to 40Hz, so doesn't plumb the absolute depths. Integration with the satellite speakers could be a little tighter, however – sometimes the soundstage feels a little disjointed.

Another minor negative is that the Polk satellites' high-frequency output errs on the polite side, which can rob some movie moments of real attacking verve.

However, the £330 asking price was always bound to come with some performance limitations. Accept these and you have a fine budget 5.1 choice ■

SPECIFICATIONS

TL1
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 2.5in midrange driver; 1 x 0.5in tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: To 22kHz
SENSITIVITY: N/A
POWER HANDLING: 100W
DIMENSIONS: 95(w) x 165(h) x 123(d)mm
WEIGHT: 0.8kg

TL1 CENTRE
DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 2.5in midrange drivers; 1 x 0.5in tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: To 22kHz
SENSITIVITY: N/A
POWER HANDLING: 100W
DIMENSIONS: 381(w) x 101(h) x 88(d)mm
WEIGHT: 1.5kg

TL1600 (SUBWOOFER)
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 8in long-throw Dynamic Balance polymer composite driver
ENCLOSURE: Downward-firing vented port
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: Down to 40Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 100W (peak)
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 317(w) x 352(h) x 317(d)mm
WEIGHT: 9.3kg
CONNECTIONS: L/R line input; speaker-level input/output

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Compact 5.1 speaker system

POSITION:
Sits between TL250 and TL150 packages

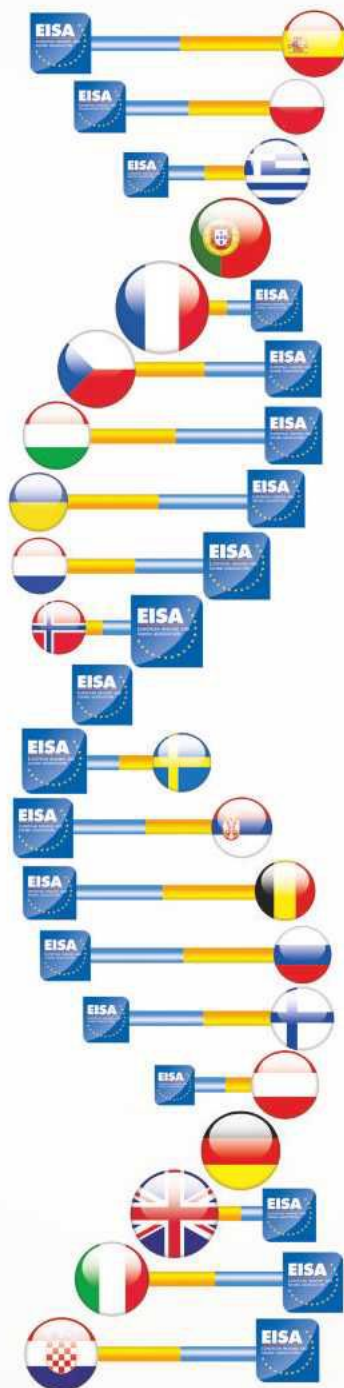
PEERS:
Tannoy HTS101;
JBL Cinema 510;
Wharfedale DX1 HCP

HCC VERDICT

Polk Audio TL1600
 → £330 Approx → www.polkaudio.com
HIGHS: Crisp, refined sound; composed at loud volumes; accurate imaging across the sound stage; gorgeous design
LOWS: Sub/sat integration could be better; satellite tweeters short of bite

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Overall ★★★★★

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Bargain-priced 5.1

Danny Phillips puts his separates system to one side and gives this affordable all-in-one package a run for its money



SAMSUNG'S ENTRY-LEVEL 5.1 system throws in a set of super-compact speakers, a Blu-ray receiver and a subwoofer. It'll set you back around £250, which is barely more than a standalone soundbar.

Looking at the snug packaging, it's hard to believe everything's in there. I pulled out the diddy little speakers and installed them around my room on the TV stand and shelves. Their gloss-black finish and small form are the epitome of 'living room-friendly.'

There's a plasticky feel to the black finish, but the hexagonal shape and metal mesh on the front make them surprisingly solid.

The sats are joined by a compact sub, which does itself no favours with the exposed chipboard on the back and lightweight cabinet, but the front looks attractive enough. The black Blu-ray receiver appears practically identical to Samsung's standalone BD-H6500, right down to the curved corner.

Touch-sensitive controls and a USB port adorn the front of the Blu-ray unit, while an NFC panel on top allows pairing of Android devices to stream music via Bluetooth.

Connections also include an HDMI (ARC) output, optical and analogue stereo inputs and Ethernet. Most people will plump for the built-in Wi-Fi. The wireless fun continues with Wi-Fi Direct and screen mirroring. File format support via DLNA or

USB is decent, including AVCHD, DivX HD, MKV, FLAC and ALAC – the last two not in hi-res, sadly. Network streaming and online video playback is simple and problem-free.

There's no DTS Neo:Fusion processing as found on Samsung's higher-end systems but there's a bunch of sound and picture presets to check out, plus the usual stuff like HD audio decoding and 3D BD playback.

Bold, engaging onscreen menus and an intuitive remote make operation easy – this is the perfect system for beginners.

It's only when you fire up a film that you realise why the HT-H5500 costs just £250. The smallscale drivers and shallow cabinets have a hard time coping with the rigours of dynamic, layered material, resulting in a honky, hard-edged sound that never fully satisfies.

The freeway fight scene in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* is played with plenty of aggression – every car crash and gunshot blast has a forceful, attacking edge and decent heft from the sub – but it tests the tolerance of your eardrums with the volume pushed anywhere over halfway.

Fine sonic detail also gets glossed over. High frequencies are spat out rather than caressed, leaving the balance midrange-heavy.

Dialogue is clearly articulated and the subwoofer adds a degree of scale to proceedings, although there's very little finesse or agility when it starts rumbling.

Let's not be too hard on the HT-H5500, though. The rear speakers offer the sort of immersive surround staging you won't get from a soundbar, and its sound is still enjoyable. Not Samsung's finest moment, but not paying through the nose makes its flaws tolerable, and the feature list and styling are plus points ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes
UPSCALING: Yes. To 1080p
CONNECTIONS: HDMI v1.4 output (ARC); optical digital audio input; analogue stereo input; Ethernet port; built-in Wi-Fi; USB port; FM aerial input
SACD/DVD-A PLAYBACK: No/No
DTS-HD/DOLBY TRUEHD DECODING: Yes/Yes
CLAIMED POWER OUTPUT: 1,000W
DIMENSIONS (MAIN UNIT): 430(w) x 55(h) x 224(d)mm
WEIGHT (PACKAGE): 10kg
FEATURES: DLNA media streaming; internet apps; screen mirroring; Bluetooth; NFC; Wi-Fi Direct; media playback via USB; eight sound modes; picture presets; FM radio

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Budget 5.1 system

POSITION:
The second step on Samsung's home cinema ladder, above the HT-H4500

PEERS:
Panasonic SC-BTT405;
Sony BDV-E3100

HCC VERDICT

Samsung HT-H5500

→ £250 Approx → www.samsung.co.uk
 → Tel: 0330 726 7864

HIGHS: Lively sound; compact design; generous features for the money; hassle-free operation

LOWS: No ITV Player, 4OD or Demand 5; hard tone; lacks composure at high volumes; subwoofer needs more agility

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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Making a stand...

Martin Pipe finds a new home (and audio system) for his flatscreen TV – but does this sort of convenience product offer enough performance chops to win him over?



The central in the grille provides volume/source information

THE APPEAL OF a soundbar is obvious, but here we have something a little different – the Somle Silent White, a substantially built and easily-assembled TV stand with fixed-height (150mm) glass equipment-shelf and a integrated soundbase thrown in.

I'm personally quite taken with the Silent's glossy-white Euro-modern appearance. But if your décor is more antique than IKEA, it might not fit in. Behind the metal grilles reside the front-facing drive units – a 1.5in dome tweeter and 4in bass/mid driver for each channel – which are positioned as close as possible towards the cabinet's left and right extremes in order to maximise stereo separation. There's also a down-firing 8in subwoofer.

Volume and source functions, as well as bass/treble control and a quintet of DSPs, are controlled via touch-controls or the supplied handset. Among the source options are HDMI (two ports, with basic 'loophrough' output; the Silent offers no OSDs or ARC) and Bluetooth 4.0 feature for unlocking the music collection of your smartphone or tablet.

The HDMI passthrough output is stripped of audio, presumably so that you don't have to mute the TV. In standby, it won't pass the AV stream of the last-used HDMI source. This means you can't insert your AV amplification into the HDMI loop, using the Silent for regular viewing and a full surround sound rig at other times. The

Silent's other inputs (analogue stereo, optical/coaxial digital) can, however, provide an inelegant workaround.

Performance

The Movies DSP transcended expectations with my *Oblivion* Blu-ray, especially when you consider that the Silent doesn't handle 5.1 soundtracks (it's 2-channel/downmix only). A sense of scale is hinted at – the deep 'thuds' of the manoeuvring drones are given the necessary weight courtesy of the sub.

You don't get the palpable sonic envelope that a good multichannel system creates around you – depth is limited. The system's talents are more evident when recreating the subtler ambiances (the birdsong of the secret retreat or the dripping water in New York's public library). Interestingly, the news mode also boasts virtual surround – but with a tiny amount of reverb added. Night mode compresses the audio's dynamic range and gives it a rather thin presentation, but will help when you don't want to disturb others.

Compared to my Samsung flatscreen the Silent gives a considerably more fulsome sound, marked by presence at both frequency extremes. Dialogue sounds a tad dry, but I'd rather have that than cabinet rattle or a boxy colouration. And listening to various music genres via Bluetooth, or from BBC4's Friday-night output was enjoyable. The Silent get close to good budget hi-fi.

Overall, this good-looking stand may have some restrictions, but will find fans. Its top surface will accommodate practically all TVs up to 55in, and the two-channel audio performance is decent ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 1.5in dome tweeters; 2 x 8in paper-coned bass/mid drivers; 1 x 8in paper-coned subwoofer

ON BOARD POWER: 130W(RMS)

CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI inputs, 1 x HDMI output, coaxial digital, optical digital, stereo analogue phono, Bluetooth

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS: 1,212(w) x 430(h) x 420(d)mm

WEIGHT: 34kg

FEATURES: Easy self-assembly; 1135mm-long shelf with fixed 150mm vertical clearance; five sound effects modes (SRS, movie, news, music, night); bass/treble controls; Bluetooth 4.0 with range up to 8m; front-panel touch controls and volume-level indicator; HDMI output passes video (inc 3D) but not audio

AV INFO

PRODUCT: TV stand with integrated audio system

POSITION: Smaller of two Silent products

PEERS: Techlink M Series

HCC VERDICT

Somle Silent White

→ £700 Approx → www.valueav.co.uk

→ Tel: 020 3290 2773

HIGHS: Looks great; robust construction; numerous inputs; transformative sound quality relative to average TV

LOWS: Lacks true surround; limited HDMI passthrough; shelf is fixed (and your gear mustn't impede the down-firing subwoofer!)

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Zapper dapper do!

Adrian Justins controls his hardware with an affordable Smart remote

ONE FOR ALL'S Smart Zapper is yet another gizmo released to work in conjunction with its Nevo app (some readers will remember the Nevo name from its pro-grade universal remote days). It's a small, battery-powered IR blaster with eight re-assignable physical control buttons, which connects to your smartphone or tablet using the Bluetooth Smart standard (compatibility is not universal and generally requires the latest versions of Android or iOS). It's controlled by the free-to-download app. So you get a touchscreen universal remote (and don't have to deal with multiple apps), plus a cutesy regular handset to boot.

There's always a short delay whilst Nevo re-pairs with the Zapper but once hooked up commands are executed instantaneously. A setup wizard guides you through selecting hardware from the comprehensive list; after a slightly labourious process of executing basic commands you're up and running with



shortcuts for watching TV or movies, listening to audio or a customisable fourth macro. The app is clever enough to ask which devices need powering on or off and you can set up separate gear for use in different rooms.

By and large most commands are nicely displayed, spread over three screens per device (on an iPhone). I had no trouble configuring and using a Samsung TV, Sky+ HD PVR, Sony

The Smart Zapper doubles as a simple physical remote

Blu-ray deck and Onkyo receiver. One or two buttons didn't work out of the gate but these are easy to reassign (including the icon). Another handy feature is that when watching TV, you can adopt a landscape view to display the EPG for your service provider, save favourite channels and select and tune in the PVR, etc.

Overall, this is a decent little gizmo that may be exactly what you're looking for if your coffee table is getting cluttered ■

HCC VERDICT

One For All Smart Zapper → £35

Overall ★★★★★

MARMITEK HDTV ANYWHERE → Approx £280

Make extra use of your mains

Video sending doesn't have to be done wirelessly. **Adrian Justins** gets plugged in

PROMISING AN EASY way to transmit Full HD video signals around your house using existing mains power lines, Marmitek's HDTV Anywhere consists of a rather dull-looking transmitter and receiver, each of which have an HDMI output. The transmitter has two HDMI inputs.

You need to plug both boxes directly into a wall-mounted mains socket to avoid

weakening the signal and you should avoid locating the units near to other electrical devices such as phones, microwaves, etc.

Both units have LEDs that show when a link has been established over the mains and indicate which source is selected. You can watch the same source in two rooms simultaneously and a simple remote allows you to switch sources. And you can use your

playback devices' own remotes to change channels, pause, rewind, etc thanks to an IR return function.

The system supports 1080p video with HDCP and PCM audio. I was impressed by how it coped ably with my Victorian terraced house in terms of image and sound quality. There was no noticeable degradation to Sky HD or Blu-ray transmissions. However, the transmitter box did crash from time to time, requiring a power cycle just to let me watch TV in my normal viewing room. This infallibility took the gloss off what is otherwise a very useful multi-room solution ■



Full HD video is supported

HCC VERDICT

Marmitek HDTV Anywhere → £280

Overall ★★★★★



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October 2013 - Precision 6.2



Precision 6.2



Precision 6.4



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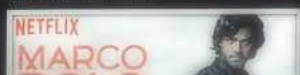
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DIGITAL COPY

Mark Craven discovers that being told something definitely won't happen doesn't always guarantee that it won't actually happen – and wonders whether Netflix is right for him

IN AN ANSWER to a reader's letter in the last issue I said I didn't want to be a 'Netflix knocker'. And truly I don't. But the American streaming giant is certainly making it pretty hard work. Here's why.

Firstly, Netflix has changed its UK pricing structure. There's nothing wrong with that, of course – it can charge whatever it likes and consumers will either accept it or stomp off elsewhere. And it has retained the £5.99 per month option that's so tempting. Only now, that particular streaming plan limits you to SD content. If you want HD, you'll have to pay £6.99, and if you want 4K/Ultra HD, you'll need to pay £8.99.

When it began changing its pricing structure, I received an email saying, 'As a thank you for being a member of Netflix already, we guarantee that your plan and price will not change for two years.' This was important – so important that it's one of the emails I actually archived in the right place – because when I signed up on the £5.99 standard fee, 4K (and HD) streaming was included *gratis*.

You can probably guess what happened next. While hunting around the Netflix menus last month, **I noticed that I was no longer being offered 4K streaming for content that I know supports it.**

Annoyingly, you can't view your account details via the Netflix app on a Smart TV. At least, not on the Samsung model I was using. So I logged on to the website, dug up my user info, and found I was now on the £6.99 per month HD (but not 4K) plan. Yet oddly I was still being billed at £5.99 per month.

Customer services was obviously my first port of call, so I opted for a 'live chat' with a Netflix rep. It was all very jolly, with plenty of, 'We're really going to work as fast as we can to sort this for you, Mark,' and 'Oh! That doesn't sound right!' from the person

I was communicating with in a pop-up window. But I soon realised that it wasn't going to be plain-sailing when I was told that it might have been caused by 'irregularities' on my superfast broadband connection, despite the obvious fact that my streaming plan had been changed. I sighed when instructed to reboot my router, but followed the suggestion. The result was no change to my Netflix account's capabilities, and having to start another live chat session because my 'net connection had been interrupted. Then, by the time my new advisor was up to speed with my problem, I realised my dinner was getting cold...

Eventually, a few days later, and following a third (and very quick) natter with another Netflix rep, my issue was resolved. 4K was back! However, my plan is still listed as £6.99 per month, HD only, but I'm still being charged £5.99. It's all a bit of a mess.

I want movies!

And here's my other issue with Netflix – the content's not great is it? It's telling that the service is chiefly advertised with images from US TV series, because on the movie side it's a bit of a letdown, with a noticeable lack of recent titles and some bizarre recommendations (DreamWorks' *Spooky Stories* 'toon is related to Ridley Scott's *Alien*, apparently). The artwork-heavy UI hints at a multitude of riches, but dig a little deeper and the cupboard feels bare.

I suspect, however, that this is probably just me. I already have a large disc library and a Sky Movies sub, so I'm hardly the target market. And I'll keep subscribing for the 4K material. At least until it boots me on to the more expensive streaming plan... ■

Do you have a Netflix sub? Let us know what you think of it. Email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Mark Craven is currently using his Netflix account to re-watch US police drama *The Shield*, as he's too lazy to locate the DVD copies he already owns





FILM FANATIC

With the internet awash with new trailers for upcoming blockbusters, **Anton van Beek** reveals why he's rather excited about what Hollywood has in store for 2015...

WELL, THAT'S 2014 done and dusted – and good riddance, too. Not that I didn't enjoy many of the flicks that rolled into cinemas, but each of them (yes, even *Guardians of the Galaxy*) all feel much too 'last-year' to get excited about now. Thankfully, we're at the start of a brand-new year, and once again Hollywood hasn't wasted any time in unleashing a wave of promo trailers for what it expects to be its biggest blockbusters. And the selection is quite mouth-watering.

Ignoring February's *Jupiter Ascending* (there's a distinct lack of hype about this sci-fi from the Wachowskis), blockbuster season kicks off in earnest in 2015 with the early April release of *Furious 7*. With Jason Statham, Kurt Russell, Tony Jaa and Ronda Rousey joining the established stars Vin Diesel, the late Paul Walker, Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson, Michelle Rodriguez and Tyrese Gibson, the *Fast & Furious* franchise has undergone a transformation into the automotive equivalent of *The Expendables*. Expect cars, guns, quips and ludicrous stunts aplenty.

The ringing of cash registers is then set to get even louder a few weeks later, when Marvel's *Avengers: Age of Ultron* could break all previous box office records. Once again the studio appears to have loaded the film with everything its devoted fans want. In other words, it'll offer audiences a cavalcade of breathtaking action, spectacular special effects and more in-jokes and Easter Eggs than Thor can shake his hammer at.

Providing there are no more delays, *Mad Max: Thunder Road* will follow in May, with tough-guy Tom Hardy stepping into the shoes once worn by Mel Gibson. Maybe it will do well enough at the multiplex to encourage a crossover with the *Fast & Furious* franchise? After all, the plots in the latter

series have become so convoluted that it can't be much longer before time travel is employed in an effort to straighten out the chronology.

Dino-mite entertainment

June's *Jurassic World* wants to make up for the failures of the last two films in the series by unleashing the prehistoric predators in an open theme park. Judging by the trailer, we'll get to see *Guardians of the Galaxy* star Chris Pratt zooming around on a motorbike accompanied by a pack of raptor sidekicks. It's moments like this that continue to bring out the nine-year-old child in me. And the thought of hundreds of tourists being snacked on by CGI dinosaurs, of course...

One month later and *Terminator: Genisys* takes its bow. This sequel/reboot has been getting an awful lot of stick online (and not just for the spelling of its sub-title), but personally I think the trailer looks pretty fun and demonstrates a more innovative use of the central time travel gimmick than any entry since James Cameron's original. Also, the *Terminator* franchise so far consists of one truly great film, one extremely overrated sequel and two absolute stinkers, so this latest offering can't exactly tarnish its reputation any further.

Bypassing November's Bond outing (at the time of writing, all we've had is a title and a cast list – Monica Bellucci! Christoph Waltz!) we arrive at *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, the film that everything else has been leading up to. We've all seen the first trailer, and I'm excited. Indeed, the last time I was this excited was in 1999 when the trailer for *The Phantom Menace* arrived. Oh. Hold on a minute. Suddenly I have a very bad feeling about this ■

Which of the year's blockbusters are you most excited about? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Anton van Beek might bitch and moan about those pesky *Star Wars* prequels, but he's still watched them more times than classics like *Citizen Kane*!



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PICTURE THIS

Bought a new TV but not happy with the look of skin tones? Calibrator **Vincent Teoh** reveals why inaccurate greyscale could be at fault, and suggests you get busy with your presets...

AS A PROFESSIONAL calibrator, one of the most common reasons people ask me to tune their TVs is to obtain more realistic skin tones. Nothing jolts you out of an enjoyable viewing experience more than horrible-looking flesh tones, because these are part of a small group of colours called 'memory colours' – hues with which we are so familiar in real life that we instantly know if they don't look right.

So why do skin tones invariably look wrong on a TV right out of the box? As usual, it's because manufacturers are trying to achieve bright, vivid images with their screens so they stand out in a retail setting against the competition.

One of the sneakiest methods used to increase perceived brightness is by injecting higher amounts of blue energy into various shades of grey from black to white (known as 'greyscale'). The beauty of this technique is that it doesn't increase absolute light output (and power consumption) by much, nor does it blow out the highlight details, but it does give the illusion of 'whiter' whites – manufacturers of PC monitors have used this trick for years.

On most modern TVs, each pixel is made up of three subpixels: red, green, and blue. To produce a neutral shade of grey, all three should fire at equal intensities: a dominant blue subpixel would result in blue-tinted greys; whereas a dominant red subpixel would yield red-tinted greys. A neutral greyscale is important to accurate colour rendition, as it works like a canvas upon which colour information is overlaid. If the underlying greyscale is blue-tinted, then the tint would be transmitted to all the colours portrayed by the TV, leading to blueish skin tones.

Now, frosty skin tones don't look good, so to compensate many TV makers boost the intensity of red colour (an approach different from adjusting the red component in greys) to restore some pinkness to

faces. While this works to an extent, it can't account for the wide range of complex flesh tones, and usually exaggerates the colour of red in everything else on screen. This is known as 'red push'.

So what can be done without recourse to pro-grade tools and software? Well, there's one thing in particular – switch to the most accurate picture preset on your TV! For Samsung, it's Movie; on Sony, it's Cinema; with Panasonic it's True Cinema or THX Cinema; for LG, use Expert or ISF Expert. **These presets come closest to delivering a greyscale of D65, the standard adopted by the film and broadcast industry** and employed on studio monitors throughout content creation/distribution. If you're used to watching computer or laptop screens all day, initially the image provided by these more accurate presets may look too yellow, but persist with them and you'll be rewarded with more realistic skin tones (and colours in general) once your eyes become attuned. These settings don't just reduce brightness and deactivate (much of the time) motion smoothing modes – they have an important impact on colour reproduction, too.

For a good image to assess skin tones, pause a BD of *Casino Royale* at around 00:25:53 after James Bond steps down from the plane – Daniel Craig's face should appear natural and healthy without excessive reddening of the lips. If flesh tones look overly hot (especially after switching to a warmer picture preset), you can try dialling down the colour setting. However, since this control affects all colours, including those unassociated with skin tones, be gentle and never decrease it by more than five clicks from default ■

Are you happy with your TV or projector's preset modes? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Vincent Teoh has worked as a professional video calibrator for seven years and has been known to spend his holidays fine-tuning the TVs in the hotel



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'Sit back and enjoy!'

HCC reader **Patrick Peeters** has a passion for movies, music and memorabilia – and a philosophy of 'If I'm happy, it's good enough.' Here we take a tour of his cinema room

Introduce yourself...

I'm Patrick Peeters, aged 38. I work as an Aerial Filming Technician/Operator. Previously I've been a rack engineer (camera image control for multicamera television shoots) and a camera crane operator for TV. And for the last two and a half years of that I combined it with working as a projectionist in a multiplex, where

I made the transition from 35mm to DCP (Digital Cinema Package) on 2K Barco PJs, first with an Active 3D system from X-Pand and then Passive 3D from Master Image.

How long have you been an AV-holic?

For about ten years. I started with a very cheap, plastic 5.1 speaker set, where the subwoofer

was used as the receiver to change the 2.0 input to 5.1 output. I used this in combination with one of the last big Sony CRT televisions, before buying myself a Panasonic Viera because I wanted a plasma for the deep blacks. That was back in the days of HD Ready.

Then it all changed when I bought the B&W speakers and the Pioneer hardware. I was



Patrick built his own sliding mount so he can switch from TV to projector viewing – our *Tron* drop-in illustrates the size of his projected image

This Terminator skull is just one of many items of his film memorabilia



unaware of what was available back then, so I was thinking about other speakers just because of the look of them. But I knew I had to go to Alpha High-End (in Antwerp) as they are a specialist store. There I was able to listen to all combinations of speakers and receivers with my own CDs, and they let me do this on my own, just sitting there and listening (I can recommend this sort of session to everyone who's searching for gear!). And I came to the B&W/Pioneer combination...

Whereabouts in your house is the cinema room?

I'm living on the ground floor of an apartment building, and the movie room is the living room. Besides the AV equipment, furniture, disc rack and film-related decorations there is nothing else, so it doesn't function anymore as a normal living room!

That was fine when living alone. But when my girlfriend came to live with me we decided to make a real living room at the other side of the apartment – now people can sit somewhere when visiting!

What AV kit do you have in your system?

From Panasonic I have a PT-AE700E projector, TH-42PV60EH plasma and DMP-BDT310 Blu-ray player. Then there's a Pioneer DV-696AV DVD/SACD player and VSX-AX4ASI-s receiver. The speakers are the aforementioned Bowers & Wilkins, all from the 600 Series.

There are lots of other accessories in my system, including a 1TB Western Digital Live TV Hub, Konig HDMI splitter, cables from Supra, Sommer and Hicon and Vogel's mounts

What speaker config are you running?

I have a 5.1 array, with the surround left and

surround right channels quite near to me due to the limitations of the room.

You've obviously invested a lot in blackout blinds. How do these help the system's performance?

The blackout blinds are there for two reasons. Firstly, they help with the reflection of light; I painted the side walls in matt black, but there is a big window on one side and a double glass door on the other. So I wanted to eliminate the reflections with these blinds. For this same reason I painted the ceiling dark grey, which results in less reflected light but still a nice colour scheme – and not a complete black room during the time that it's not being used as a cinema.

The other reason for using the blinds is to avoid audio reflections on the glass. I only used the calibration mic from my Pioneer AVR in the

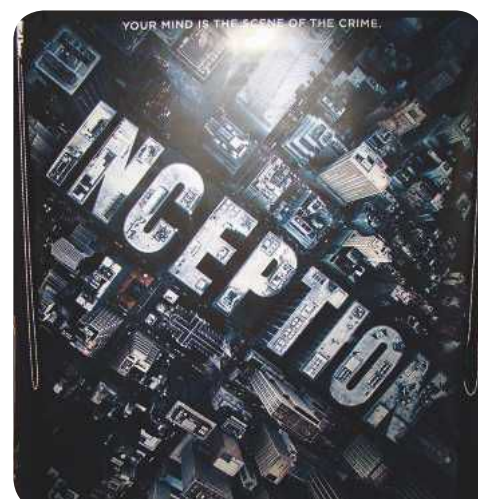


The Panasonic 720p PJ is due to be upgraded soon to a Full HD Optima model



Our AV-holic works as an Aerial Filming Technician – we assume he doesn't suffer from vertigo...

The well-stocked disc shelf can be hidden from view, both by a black-out blind or an Inception poster





The B&W centre speaker (above) is mounted on a stand, angled upwards towards the listening position

The 5.1 array uses B&W 603s on L/R duty (left) and wall-mounted 601s for the surround channels



room – no professional measurements. I'm happy with it so it's good enough. (You will see that this is a recurring theme – if I'm happy with something and I enjoy it, then it is good enough for me!)

We love the sliding TV system – where did you get this and how is it controlled?

Aha, this sliding TV system is my own invention! I always wanted to be able to watch TV or a film with the PJ from the same seating position with one speaker system. In my first setup I had a ceiling-mounted roll-up screen that came in front of the TV. But with the arrival of the B&W speakers I changed the arrangement in the room 90 degrees and I wanted to use the big wall as a projection surface. Thinking about a lift for the television behind the centre speaker, I soon realised that this would never have worked, and so I came up with the idea of moving the TV when using the PJ. I found this sliding system that didn't look too industrial and is visually acceptable in a room like this. It's normally used for glass sliding doors. The frame I've made myself from DIY materials, in combination with a Vogel's bracket. For the cables I used an industrial type of cable carrier that I knew from the railcam system I used in my television work.

I really like the result, and people who see me moving the TV for the first time are always amazed. In the development phase I was once thinking about a motorised rail but that would

have never looked as clean as it does now so I kept it manually operated.

You're projecting straight onto a white wall – have you used special paint or wall preparation?

I've used Cine Dream Paint on the wall, but I think a good quality white paint will do. The wall preparation is not done well, and even worse is the application of the paint. In very bright shots (such as some in *Oblivion*) you can see the bands of the different sections of paint I applied each time. But I did it myself so I'm happy.

What's your opinion of the system's performance. What areas, if any, do you think could be improved?

The audio performance is so wonderful. I enjoy it every day that I'm home. Watching TV, listening to soundtrack CDs or watching a movie or concert with the PJ... it all goes through the B&W speakers. I don't think I will ever switch to another brand.

The video performance was good until I blew the PJ lamp (during a screening of *Cloud Atlas*) and now the interior is damaged and there is a small uneven blue haze in the bottom-right corner of the screen. But I'm not going to replace it until I buy the PJ that is on my wish list: the Optoma HD30. The plasma TV is a very good screen with beautiful blacks, but I only use it for TV.



Patrick's games room and (left) Psycho-themed shower curtain!

The area that can be improved is the system's overall resolution. At this moment it's only compressed audio and 720p. All the equipment can handle 1080i but for me that is a lesser resolution. But I enjoy the setup so much. Sit back and enjoy! Don't bother with the technical specs.

I would like to point out that I've chosen from the beginning to put all the gear next to the seating position. I can't understand those who have invested in a setup, sometimes a complete room change with an effort to eliminate light coming in from outside, but who put their equipment under the screen so they're always looking at the lights and displays during a movie. I knew I needed a 15m HDMI cable to achieve this but it was worth the investment because I only see the film and not the gear.

Roughly how much have you spent on the whole room?

Just under €10,000 I think.

What do your friends and family think of the cinema?

People who have watched a movie or enjoyed a short demo seem to like it very much. I love to invite friends over. I'm even able to persuade some people to watch a movie that they wouldn't bother to see when it's on TV because of the bigscreen and surround sound. And a friend even asks for a special VIP combo >

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Patrick's kit rack (which includes a Pioneer AVR and Panasonic BD player) is sited at the rear of the room, so no pesky LEDs distract from the bigscreen visuals

ticket so she can see a movie and play on the pinball machine afterwards...

Even if the system is only 720p with compressed audio, it's so immersive. Being just less than four metres away from a 142in screen, and with the B&W speakers, really puts you inside a movie.

What's your favourite Blu-ray?

Because I'm a big fan of instrumental film scores, there are a lot of movies I watch for the bigscreen/audio experience and not necessarily because they're my favourite movies. And there are movies I watch a lot because I just love them (but many of them don't exist on BD).

Here's a few: *Tron: Legacy*, *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, *Transformers*, *Avalon* (DVD), *Thunderheart* (DVD), *Sneakers*, *The Fifth Element*, *John Carter*, *Super 8*, *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Bourne Supremacy*.

Do you ever stream movies?

No. My Western Digital hub is filled with movies but I never watch one from that. I like to stand before my shelf and look for a movie

BE IN HCC!

EMAIL US: If you want to share your home cinema setup – big or small – with other HCC readers, email a selection of hi-res pictures (including one of yourself if you want) to letters@homecinemachoice.com with the subject heading 'AV-Holic', and we'll be in touch.

that I want to watch. And I also want to have the extras to watch.

What's your favourite bit of kit?

The Bowers & Wilkins speakers! Listen to them and you'll know why!

What's next on your equipment wishlist, and why?

As well as the Optoma HD30, I'm after a new AVR from Pioneer for uncompressed audio and the Full HD signal path.

Are you excited by 4K and Dolby Atmos?

4K: not really. Especially not for my home cinema room.

Dolby Atmos I compare with 3D images – you are even more immersed in the movie. So I'm very interested to see its evolution for movie theatres and home cinemas. But, again, it's probably not right for my current room ■

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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current technology?
Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **HCC** is here to help

Philips still makes BD decks!

I wonder why we see so few reviews of Philips Blu-ray players in the magazine?

It has an excellent player – the Philips Fidelio model BDP-9700/12. Any chance of a review of this one? It might just surprise us, in comparison with the likes of Oppo...

Wim Van den Broucke, Belgium

Mark Craven replies: The last Philips Blu-ray player we had a look at was certainly some while ago. Here in the UK, the brand's consumer electronics focus seems to be mostly on flatscreen TVs and its Fidelio



Philips' BDP-9700/12 plays SACDs

audio range (encompassing headphones, soundbars and speakers). A look at the Philips UK website does indeed throw

up the BDP-9700/12, but it's listed as out of stock on the company's own e-shop, and doesn't appear to be on sale

anywhere else. Also, it launched over 18 months ago.

Still, it does look like an intriguing player – Super Audio

★ STAR LETTER...

AVRs without HDCP 2.2 – what's the solution?

Hi. I am in the process of upgrading my TV and AV receiver. I have already done loads of research and shortlisted the Samsung UE48HU7500 4K TV and Denon AVR-X2100W as the receiver. I have chosen the Denon receiver because it has the latest 2.0 HDMI connections and has 4K passthrough and 4K upscaling facilities.

However, doing more research I have found out that this time next year the Denon will not be compatible with native 4K as it requires an HDCP 2.2-compatible receiver.

While most new UHD TVs that came out in 2014 provide HDMI 2.0 connections with HDCP 2.2, and forthcoming sources such as 4K Blu-ray and Ultra HD satellite receivers will also be HDCP 2.2-compliant, only a handful of new AV receivers have HDMI 2.0/HDCP 2.2. So what will happen when, a year or two down the road, you're ready to route an Ultra HD source such as a 4K Blu-ray player, HTPC or satellite receiver through a non-compliant receiver? The source will attempt to 'handshake' with the non-HDCP 2.2 receiver, and when that authentication process fails, you will likely be presented with a blank screen.

As you can imagine, this is quite frustrating as I would have spent a lot of my hard-earned cash only to find out that the equipment is not compatible.

Having spoken to Denon, they say that the receiver can not be updated via firmware, but would require a new chip (at extra cost).

Is there any solution where an HDMI 2.0 receiver can be compatible with HDCP 2.2 sources?

Raj Ghandi, via email

Mark Craven replies: A great letter Raj that I'm sure will resonate with plenty of other readers!

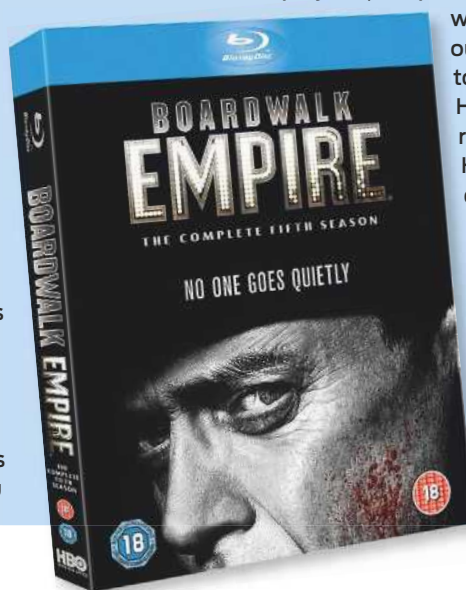
Simply put, if you want an AV receiver with HDCP 2.2 support then you will need to look at an Onkyo, as this is the only brand I'm currently aware of that offers the feature, courtesy of the Silicon Image SIL9670 chipsets it's incorporated. As you

have discovered, Denon – and indeed Pioneer and Yamaha and others – currently don't have HDCP 2.2-compliant hardware.

You rightly suggest that this could lead to blank screens down the line when 4K source hardware reaches the market. However, when I spoke to Pioneer Europe's technology manager Philippe Coppens last Summer, he speculated that eventual 4K BD players (and possibly other sources)

would offer dual HDMI outputs, enabling audio to be fed to an AVR and HDCP-protected video routed straight to an HDCP-compliant display, in a similar fashion to BD players targeted at those without HDMI v1.3 AVRs who want to still enjoy 3D Blu-rays.

Likewise, my colleague Steve May has recently spoken to engineers from Sony who suggested





Robert De Niro and Charles Grodin enjoy a break during their *Midnight Run*...

CD playback, 4K upscaling, Burr Brown DACs and an old-school chunky build quality all catch our eye. So if anyone out there has one, please let us know what you think of it!

Bring me De Niro on Blu...

Having read Anton van Beek's

that as long as the source and display can handshake it didn't matter what was in between as long as it allowed clear passthrough.

Of course, none of this is confirmed, and AV enthusiasts will need to see exactly what happens when 4K source hardware becomes available. It's also likely that a wider availability of HDCP 2.2 chipsets will mean most AVRs launched in 2015 will stock them. So it would be perfectly understandable if you were to choose to delay a purchase, or turn your sights away from the Denon AVR-X2100W.

Star letter-writer Raj wins a copy of *Boardwalk Empire: The Complete Fifth Season* on Blu-ray, courtesy of our pals at HBO Home Entertainment. It's available to buy now on Blu-ray, DVD and digital download.

recent article on how major Hollywood studios are treating classic movies on Blu-ray [*Film Fanatic*, HCC #242] it got me thinking about my own frustrations of sourcing films in high-definition.

The first title which comes to mind is *Midnight Run* starring Robert De Niro. I acknowledge it was released on HD DVD but given that is a failed format, would a release on Blu-ray be too much to hope for?

Amongst classic films I would like to see released are *The Vikings* with Kirk Douglas, and James Caan's *The Gambler*. After all, if the studio sees fit for a remake of the latter [featuring Mark Wahlberg and released in the UK on January 23] then let's have the original available at some point.

This brings me onto *The Two Jakes*, starring Jack Nicholson, which is of course the sequel to the very popular hit-film *Chinatown*. Given the current market trend for boxsets and double packs, why should it not be worthy of a release? I would be greatly surprised if fans of *Chinatown* (of which there are many) were not interested in watching its follow-up.

On the subject of Nicholson's films, I would also like to see *The Pledge* released on Blu-ray. I fondly recall its screening in the cinema and feel it's vastly underrated as a piece of cinema.

The lack of a hi-def release for *The Pledge* similarly reminds me of picking up *Blood and Wine* in which Nicholson starred. I managed to find it on a DVD release by RCV from the Netherlands, but understand the film was originally sold to 20th Century Fox. If the major film studios could see the value in licensing to independent labels for high-definition releases, in a similar manner, I might then be able to enjoy these films as the director intended them to be seen.

My hope is that with the release of Ultra High-Definition material via 4K Blu-ray, the major studios will begin to allow (or actively encourage) independent labels to license 1080p Blu-ray releases; as they will no doubt busy themselves re-releasing titles such as *Ghostbusters* and *The Wizard of Oz*.

Andrew Gray, via email

Anton van Beek replies: Good news Andrew, *Midnight Run* has been confirmed for a Blu-ray release for April of this year, courtesy of distributor Second Sight! This is, in fact, a perfect example of what I was championing in my column in the last issue – an independent company getting its mitts on a classic/cult title (and one of the HCC Ed's all-time favourite flicks...) that, for one reason or another, has been ignored by one

of the majors (in this case Universal, which did, as you say, bother to put it out on HD DVD back in 2007. But not on Blu-ray at any time since. Go figure). Anyway, full details on Second Sight's release are still under wraps, but we do know the company has been interviewing the likes of actors Charles Grodin and John Ashton, and writer George Gallo, for some exclusive bonus content, so we're very excited.

As for the other titles you mention, there's no sign of *The Vikings*, *The Gambler*, *The Pledge*, *Blood and Wine* or *The Two Jakes* getting an imminent hi-def release, so you'll just have to keep your fingers crossed and hope that someone, somewhere has a change of heart. A release of *The Gambler* would have made a bit of sense, actually. Maybe when the Wahlberg version also hits BD...

Finally, I would bet my proton pack and ruby slippers that

CONTACT US...

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Please note: we cannot guarantee to print/answer all the letters we receive. Sorry.

Ghostbusters and *The Wizard of Oz* are being talked about for an early 4K Blu-ray release.

...and bring me Gregory Peck!

In the recent issue, you ask readers to nominate which movie they would like to receive the VIP disc treatment – full restoration before transfer to the highest-quality Blu-ray.

After 75 years of movie-going (my first film was *Tarzan Finds a Son* in 1939 as a ten-year-old) I would like to nominate an almost forgotten MGM classic from 1946. Metro bought the Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Yearling* in 1938, and filming started with Spencer Tracy in 1941. Yet location difficulties caused L.B. Meyer to shelve it after spending \$500,000.

Filming resumed in 1946 with Gregory Peck and Jane Wyman, with Clarence Brown directing. It was given the full works: near perfect Technicolor and music by Delius via Herbert Stohart conducting the MGM Symphony

orchestra! The result was a beautifully crafted film about pioneering family life in backwoods America.

It should have received the Oscar in 1946, but lost out to William Wyler's *Best Years of Our Lives*.

The Yearling then. That's my choice.
Kevin McWilliams, Southampton

Anton van Beek replies: Thanks for the suggestion Kevin. And it's a good reminder that the major movie studios – and independent distributors – still have a lot of work to do when it comes to getting back-catalogue titles out in HD.

Interestingly, *The Yearling* was one of the original nominees for the American Film Institute's eventual 100 Greatest American Movies list (although, to be fair, so was *Fatal Attraction*), so it's somewhat surprising it hasn't been picked up for a Blu-ray version. Also of interest, *The Yearling* is actually available

to stream at 1080p (in America at least) via the VUDU video-on-demand service. But I appreciate that's not what you're after!

Sort me out a soundbar

Hi. I've got what is I hope an easy question. I'm looking for a soundbar (for around £200 or less) for my parent's front room. Last year I gave them my old 42in plasma when I bought a new larger TV for my own setup, which they love, and I think an improvement in sound quality would also go down well! Doesn't need to have any Smart/streaming features, just a good performance. Any ideas?
Steve Jackson, via email

Mark Craven replies: Are you sure your parents aren't after discrete speakers and a stonking amplifier, Steve? Only joking – £200 will easily get you a decent, simple to hookup soundbar that'll add some sonic flair to that 42in TV. One model to consider would be Humax's

STE-1000 BSW, which retails for around £180. This is achingly slim (and a metre long), but the separate subwoofer adds a decent bass level to the bar's onboard drivers. For such a stylish soundbar, its performance is pretty good. Alternatively, check out Pioneer's nice-sounding (but a bit chunky) SBX-N500, which has come down in price to under £200 with some retailers. This includes HDMI connectivity (the Humax doesn't) and adds DLNA networking, just in case your parents fancy it.

Or, what about a soundbase instead? This may be easier to accommodate depending on how the TV is installed and will typically offer more bass punch. A good option here is Panasonic's SC-HTE80, which was launched at around £250 but is available now (in black and white versions) for under £200. This offers HDMI in/out (including ARC) and a clear and balanced stereo soundstage.

Win! Three great Blu-rays up for grabs

Just email your answer to Competitions@homecinemachoice.com to be in with a chance



Banshee: The Complete Second Season

The second season of this absorbing, Emmy Award-winning, thrill-a-minute US TV series arrives on Blu-ray

and DVD on January 26 – and thanks to HBO Home Entertainment we have five copies of the 10-disc BD boxset up for grabs.

Question:

Siouxie and the Banshees are a famous...

Answer:

A) Rock band B) American Football team C) Dance troupe

Email your answer with '**Banshee**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



A Walk Among The Tombstones

EntertainmentOne releases this suspenseful thriller on Blu-ray and DVD from January 19. Starring Liam Neeson as an ex-cop-turned-PI investigating

a series of murders, we have five copies of the BD version to give away.

Question:

Liam Neeson played which character in 2010's *The A-Team* movie?

Answer:

A) Hannibal B) Murdock C) B.A. Baracus

Email your answer with '**Tombstones**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



The Rover

Available now on Blu-ray, DVD and On-Demand, this post-apocalyptic thriller stars Guy Pearce and Robert Pattinson searching for justice in the Australian

Outback. EntertainmentOne has

given us five copies of the Blu-ray platter to dish out.

Question:

Oscar-winner Guy Pearce played Mike Young in which Australian soap opera?

Answer:

A) Home and Away B) Sons and Daughters C) Neighbours

Email your answer with '**The Rover**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!

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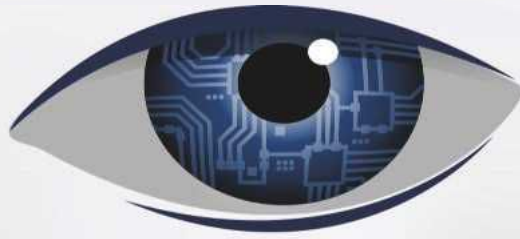
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Photo: Arteoustic SA and Sphere Custom Design

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PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **THE EXPENDABLES 3** The ageing action icons return to Blu-ray with a kick-ass Dolby Atmos soundtrack **A WALK AMONG THE TOMBSTONES** Liam Neeson goes for a rather dangerous stroll **THE GUEST** Action-horror delivers plenty of retro thrills **SIX GOTHIC TALES BY EDGAR ALLAN POE** Vincent Price classics remastered in hi-def **AND MUCH MORE!**

Greatest apes

Dawn of the Planet of the Apes 3D
→ 20th Century Fox → Region A/B BD

The smart sci-fi sequel swings into a home cinema near you. Turn the page to find out why we were so impressed by these digital primates...

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

Post-apocalyptic apes love a spot of dressage from time to time



DISC
OF THE
MONTH

Simian sequel outdoes original

20th Century Fox doesn't monkey around when it comes to making an enthralling blockbuster

→ DAWN OF THE PLANET OF THE APES 3D

Against all the odds, 2011's *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* turned out to be an unexpectedly smart and assured reboot for the iconic sci-fi franchise. And as good as that film was, director Matt (Cloverfield) Reeves's sequel trumps it in every regard.

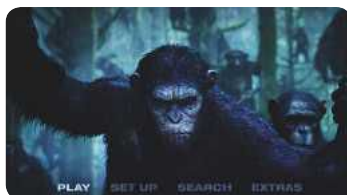
With humanity having been decimated by 'simian flu' during the intervening decade, the main focus of *Dawn...* shifts to the developing ape community and the problems that Caesar (Andy Serkis) faces from both internal and external forces when their forest home is 'invaded' by a small group of humans looking for a nearby dam able to generate electricity.

What follows is an engrossing blockbuster that manages to both resonate emotionally and dazzle with its technological achievements.

Picture: The film's gloomy aesthetic means that it's not always the most spectacular-looking 3D presentation you'll see, but there's still a lot to admire about Fox's 1.85:1-framed stereoscopic BD.

The rain-soaked hunt that opens the film feels a little flat at times, yet brighter sequences (such as the apes' initial march on San Francisco) showcase multiple layers of depth that give a palpable sense of space to the imagery, and facial close-ups, particularly those of the CG cast, also impress with their volumetric details.

Aiding appreciation of the 3D imagery is the flawless technical quality of the MVC encode. Fine details are constantly well-resolved and



HCC VERDICT

Dawn of the Planet of the Apes 3D

→ 20th Century Fox

→ Region A/B BD → £28 Approx

WE SAY: Smarter than the average popcorn flick, *Dawn...* is also a superb home cinema experience. Hail, Caesar!

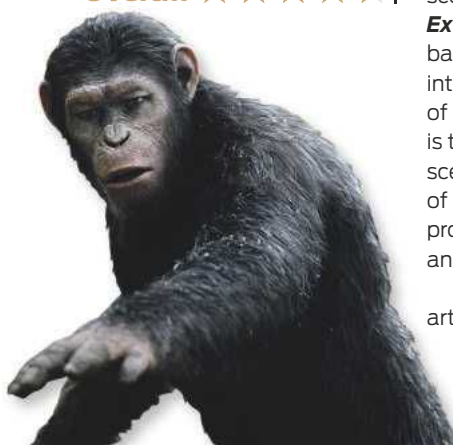
Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



there's no sign of any or additional digital noise or awkward ghosting.

For those with a 2D setup, the regular AVC encode also gets a thumbs up, never once faltering when it comes to reproducing the blue-tinted forest exteriors or the meticulous SFX work from Weta Digital.

Audio: When you consider that large portions of the movie are set in rainy forests with apes leaping through the trees, it's hardly a shock that *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*' DTS-HD Master Audio soundtrack is an extremely immersive affair.

Early adopters will be annoyed that this disc offers no chance to experience the mix's original Dolby Atmos incarnation, but the 7.1-channel incarnation found on both the 2D and 3D platters proves adept at creating a panoramic soundscape littered with positional cues and immersive effects. There's also an undercurrent of rich, resonant bass in the mix that adds plenty of cinematic weight to scenes such as the city attack in Chapters 25 and 26.

Extras: As usual, the 3D platter here is a completely barebones affair. However, the 2D disc contains an interesting selection of extras worth a visit. In place of a feature-length *Making of...* doc, the highlight is the eight-strong set of fascinating behind-the-scenes featurettes, with a combined running time of 112 minutes. Meanwhile, director Matt Reeves provides an engaging commentary for the movie and a trio of deleted scenes.

Also included are four galleries of production art and three theatrical trailers.

Deliver Us from Evil

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£25 Approx



Pitched as a cross between *Serpico* and *The Exorcist*, this moderately effective supernatural thriller

from Scott 'Sinister' Derrickson follows a New York cop (Eric Banner) who discovers that there are far more dangerous forces to contend with than the street hoods he usually encounters. Sony's Blu-ray platter serves up the film's stark visuals with a beautifully textured 2.40:1 1080p encode, and the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix gets plenty of mileage out of the occasional jump scares. Extras include a director's commentary and a chat with the former cop who inspired the film.



The Inbetweeners 2

4DVD → All-region BD
£25 Approx



Even the most fervent fans of the popular E4 sitcom will find their patience sorely tested by this sequel that

sends the filthy foursome off to Australia. Apparently aimed at teenage boys who actively hate and fear the opposite sex, *The Inbetweeners 2* is an irredeemably puerile and insulting film that deserves to sink without a trace, but which will no doubt sell by the bucketload. As for the Blu-ray, the 1080i50 encode is detailed and vibrant, although the DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio is bland. Extras are thorough, despite having lost 20 minutes of deleted scenes to secure a 15 certificate.



Sex Tape

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£20 Approx



Lightning fails to strike twice for the team behind *Bad Teacher* with this awful comedy. Cameron Diaz and

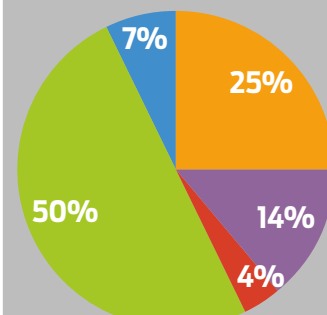
Jason Siegel star as a married couple who decide to spice up their sex life by filming themselves, only for the video to be uploaded to the cloud and distributed to the tablets they've given to family and friends. And not only is the film a complete dud, there are problems with the Blu-ray's 1080p visuals, which frequently suffer from a distracting red tint and heavily crushed blacks. Extras prove to be just as unadventurous as the disc's DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack.



WE ASKED...

Which is the best of the three *Toy Story* films?

- Toy Story ■ Toy Story 2
- Toy Story 3
- All three are equally great!
- I don't like any of them!



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action



A walk to remember? Not really...

Ageing action hero Liam Neeson's brooding crime thriller is more *Taggart* than *Taken*

→ A WALK AMONG THE TOMBSTONES

Liam Neeson takes a break from beating up people for a slightly more thoughtful role in this glum thriller based on the best-selling 1992 crime novel by Lawrence Sanders.

A Walk Among the Tombstones sees the actor bring his brooding intensity to ex New York cop turned P.I. Matthew Scudder, who has been hired to track down the killers of a drug trafficker's wife. As the investigation continues, Scudder uncovers a string of similar murders, all involving the families of people involved in the drugs trade.

As usual, Neeson is by far the best thing about the film, bringing a grizzled weariness to the lead role that you can really buy into. Unfortunately, the story his character finds himself adrift in is simultaneously underdeveloped and burdened by too many plots. Worst of all is the growing friendship between Scudder and homeless adolescent T.J. (Brian 'Astro' Bradley), which distracts attention away from the central murder-mystery with ham-fisted melodrama and clichéd character arcs.

Picture: Director Scott Frank has naturally opted for a dark and dour style in keeping with the tone of the material. Unfortunately, while it may look pretty moody, it's doesn't actually look very pretty.

The main problem is that the deliberately desaturated digital photography results in a very flat and grey AVC-encoded 2.40:1 1080p Blu-ray transfer – a situation not helped by constantly crushed blacks that offer up next-to-nothing in the way of shadow detail. Brighter scenes and close-ups do



reveal an admirable crispness and plenty of fine detail in the image, but even these don't entirely avoid the ever-so-slightly plasticized look that haunts this hi-def encode.

Audio: *A Walk Among the Tombstones* arrives on Blu-ray with a front-loaded DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 soundtrack. The L/C/R spread is fairly expansive, with well-balanced dialogue and effective panning. However, outside of giving Carlos Rafael Rivera's sinister score a little more room to breathe and a couple of moments of gunplay (most notably Chapter 13's graveyard shootout), the surround speakers are barely troubled.

Extras: This Blu-ray can only muster a pair of short behind-the-scenes featurettes. *Matt Scudder: Private Eye* (six minutes) looks at the literary origin of the character and Neeson's screen portrayal, while *A Look Behind the Tombstones* (12 minutes) is a more general overview of the film's production.



HCC VERDICT

A Walk Among the Tombstones

→ EntertainmentOne

→ Region B BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: An average Blu-ray outing for an average murder-mystery bolstered only by Neeson's central performance

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Director Patrick Hughes (centre) kicks back with his all-star cast



Not so Expendable after all...

It seems there's no stopping Stallone and his action cronies from coming back for more



UFC champ Ronda Rousey adds a touch of glamour to the new-look team

→ THE EXPENDABLES 3: EXTENDED EDITION

It's business-as-usual in this third instalment in Sylvester Stallone's cinematic retirement home for elderly action stars. This time around the plot involves the search for a former-Expendable-turned-arms dealer (Mel Gibson), a situation that is apparently so serious that it necessitates not only the recruiting of even more old action stars (Wesley Snipes! Antonio Banderas! Harrison Ford! Er... Kelsey Grammer!), but an injection of fresh blood (Kellan Lutz! Glen Powell! Ronda Rousey! Victor Ortiz!).

In terms of the franchise, *The Expendables 3* is the silliest of the lot, with a definite humorous bent

and a lack of the OTT bloodsplatter that marked out the first two (a result of chasing a PG-13 rating the US). However, it's also plenty of fun if you're in the right mood.

Picture: The AVC 2.40:1 1080p image quality is almost as much of a roller-coaster as the film itself. While facial close-ups are stunningly detailed and pin-sharp, some of the skin tones seem a bit off-kilter. Conversely the detailing and lighting is so good that the make-up artist's trowel marks are almost visible. The old-team actors look even more old, worn and craggy than they do in real life as the picture focuses sharply on every line, pore and scar.

From the mute greys of tanks and rocks to the green hills and blues skies and the vivid orange of

DEMO SCREEN...

The Expendables 3: Extended Edition

Time code: 103.40 – 111.00



Bringing reinforcements: Just when you think our heroes have won the day, the other half of an army rolls onto the scene. Mostly in tanks. Things are about to get really serious...



The bike leap: Or maybe not, as new Expendables recruit Smilee opts to ascend a building with a huge bike jump up to an overhanging bar on the sixth floor. We presume the lift must have been out of order.



It's throttling time: No *Expendables* film would be complete without a weapons down, body armour off, bare-knuckle fight to the death. Sly and Mel are happy to oblige – in shallow water for added effect.



Jump for your life: As the building collapses around him, Barney makes an impossible leap for a rope hanging from the rapidly exiting helicopter. Will he make it? What do you think...



No man is left behind when these guys go for their morning jog (left)



As always, this latest sequel is packed with action stars from the '80s (above)

explosions, the film does not hold back on the colour palette. Shadowy scenes are almost nonexistent. However, rarely have we seen a film with so many changes in white balance between cuts. Outside sequences are engulfed in a warm honey hue, while most of the inside shots are blueish and balanced much cooler.

There are a few instances of artefacting around some moving objects. Black objects on light backgrounds sometimes get a slight shimmering edge – particularly Stallone's black clothes and hair. It's only occasional but it jars.

Of course, these are all minor technical niggles. In reality *The Expendables 3*'s outrageous action, spectacular detail and vivid colour simply ride roughshod over these issues and, by the time the credits roll, leave your eyes exhausted.

Audio: As one of the initial BDs to have a fully-native Atmos soundtrack, it was straight into 7.2.4 configuration for the first viewing.

And, er, wow! Everything here is wound up to the max, yet the movie retains far better dynamic range than either of its forerunners. There is clear differentiation between gentle conversation and, say, small nuclear explosions. Meanwhile, effects leap cleanly out the audio carnage (of which there is plenty). In fact, dialogue is brilliantly focused and intelligible, meaning you understand everything Stallone says – which may be a first.

The Atmos height channels get full use throughout almost every second. Unsurprisingly, overhead helicopter pans and flying bullets lead the acoustic charge from the ceiling but oddly these are also joined by individual and massed screams of people dying. As that is 'several per second'

in many parts of the *The Expendables 3* there is often rather a lot of blood-curdling wailing from above. You don't seem to be able to pin-point this effect during the movie (we disabled the other channels to see what was up there), as the exploding chaos tends to drown it out. However, it does make you wonder what exactly the sound designer was trying to achieve by having all the bad guys dying overhead. Possibly: 'I've got all these new channels and I'm going to use them'.

During the battle sequences, toggling between 7.2.4 Atmos and 7.2 Dolby TrueHD gives you either thunderously enveloping 3D sound or a more traditional planar soundfield that is crisper and better defined. With all guns blazing from the ceiling even the dialogue gets a little smeared so – shocker – Atmos is not necessarily the best format for the bulk of this flick.

It's when the pace slows that the native Atmos mix comes into its own. The additional channels create proper three-dimensional effects mapped so precisely in the air that they sound 'in-room' rather than emanating from the speakers.

Slight issues with the rather odd overhead mix aside, *The Expendables 3* remains a poster child for full-fat 7.2.4 audio.

Extras: In addition to two cuts of the movie (the 126-minute 'Theatrical' and a 132-minute 'Extended'), this Blu-ray release also finds space for an enjoyable 52-minute *Making of...* doc, a pair of additional featurettes (covering new cast members and filming the action scenes), a gag reel and an extended action sequence.



HCC VERDICT

The Expendables 3: Extended Edition

→ Lionsgate → Region B BD
→ £25 Approx

WE SAY: Atmos-hedz will lap up every minute of this middling action sequel

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



No more Mister Nice Guy

Former *Downton Abbey* star Dan Stevens proves he's not such a good egg after all...

→ THE GUEST

You're Next writer Simon Barrett and director Adam Wingard serve up another slice of home invasion horror with this superb genre mash-up.

Dan Stevens plays the charming stranger who arrives at a New Mexico family home claiming to have served alongside their dead son in the army. Quickly winning over the grieving mother, he's invited to stay, bonding with the father over drinks and their son by dishing out a beating to the jocks who bully him. Only older daughter Anna (Maika Monroe) remains suspicious – a feeling that is borne out when a friend turns up dead and the army come calling...

Picture: With its mix of wide open southwestern vistas and comforting interiors, *The Guest's* 2.40:1-framed 1080p encode has a good range of material to work with and does it with aplomb. Colours have warmth, detailing isn't lost amid black crush and edges are sharp.

The Halloween dance finale is probably the best showcase for your display, with Wingard washing the entire screen with vibrant reds and purples. Colour reproduction here is excellent, with only the smallest traces of banding and no drop in detail or clarity.

Audio: *The Guest* derives a lot of its atmosphere from a retro-tinged synth soundtrack pitched somewhere between *Drive* and the '80s-era films of John Carpenter, and this Blu-ray's DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix relishes the task of rendering this in a home theatre setting.



'If anybody offers me another period drama they'll get what's coming...'

Away from the electronic music, the lossless 5.1 track excels with dialogue delivery and crafts an open, dynamic soundfield. Again, it's the final act – when the

guns start blazing – that offers the most impact.

Extras: Quality, not quantity, seems to have been the watchword when it came to assembling *The Guest's* bonus features. Filmmakers Adam Wingard and Simon Barrett unite for a candid and informative commentary track that's well worth a spin if you have a general interest in the filmmaking process; they then perform the same duty on optional chat-tracks for the disc's seven deleted scenes. Beyond that, though, there's just the theatrical trailer.

HCC VERDICT

The Guest

→ Icon Home Entertainment
→ Region B BD → £20 Approx

WE SAY: This knowing throwback to '80s horror-thrillers delivers the goods in high-definition

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Hercules 3D

Paramount → All-region BD
£28 Approx



Brett Ratner's *Hercules* is a middling sword 'n' sandals flick that strips away all the mythical stuff from the Greek legend in order to give us a more down-to-earth take on the character.

As far as daft ideas go, it's on a par with re-editing *Jason and the Argonauts* and stripping out all of Ray Harryhausen's monsters. At least Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson makes for a charismatic lead and this Blu-ray release looks and sounds absolutely flawless in both its 2D and 3D incarnations. Extras include an audio commentary by Ratner and producer Ben Flynn, five *Making of...* featurettes and 15 deleted/extended scenes.



Dead Snow 2: Red vs. Dead

EntertainmentOne → Region B BD
£25 Approx



This gloriously silly follow-up to the 2009 Norwegian cult horror-comedy finds the sole survivor of that film's

Nazi zombie rampage crashing his car while fleeing, only to wake up in hospital with a zombie arm (with a murderous mind of its own) mistakenly attached in place of his own severed limb. Meanwhile, the undead army has its sights set on a local town. This splatterfest makes a strong impression on BD courtesy of some spectacular 2.40:1-framed 1080p visuals and lively DTS-HD MA 5.1 sonics. Extras include a chat-track and short film.



Trancers

88 Films → All-region BD
£20 Approx



This 1985 sci-fi gem from director Charles Band is pitched somewhere between

Blade Runner and *The Terminator* – futuristic lawman Jack Death is sent back through time to inhabit the body of his 1980s ancestor and stop a fugitive time-traveller rewriting the future. This remastered hi-def outing restores plenty of lustre to the film's visuals (despite the occasional bit of wear and tear to the print), even if the remixed DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio is understandably focused entirely on the front speakers. Generous extras include the *City of Angels* mini-sequel.





Sheriff Hood was starting to think he'd never find that missing contact lens...

Guilty pleasure grows up (a bit)

Superlative sophomore season of Showtime's crime show will leaving you shrieking for more

→ **BANSHEE: THE COMPLETE SECOND SEASON**

With its rather carefree approach to sex and violence, this Showtime series became a guilty pleasure among Team HCC when it first surfaced back in 2013.

However, this second season sees the show take a serious step forward in quality across its 10 episodes, cutting down on the smut (but not eliminating it completely) and replacing it with a greater focus on its complex cast of characters, and a more heavyweight approach to storytelling that'll keep you gripped from beginning to end.

Following the events of the first season, life is getting tougher than ever for sheriff Lucas Hood (Anthony Starr). Gang kingpin Rabbit (Ben Cross) is still on the loose and the FBI are investigating – not a good thing when you're really a convicted criminal who has stolen the identity of a smalltown cop.

Meanwhile, Carrie (Ivana Milicevic) is dealing with the family turmoil that continues to spill out of the first run, her feelings for Lucas and the prospect of jail time.

And to make things more complicated, tensions are heating up between local



Amish crime boss Kai Proctor (Ulrich Thomsen) and Kinaho tribe leader Alex Longshadow (Anthony Ruivivar), while the teenage son of the real Lucas Hood (played by Harrison Thomas) is wanting some answers of his own...

Picture: HBO Home Entertainment

spreads the ten episodes across four BD50 platters, which helps this second series of *Banshee* appear every bit as decent as its predecessor. The AVC 1.78:1 Full HD encodes are well up to the standards we've come to expect from studio, and a reminder that TV material can hold its on in hi-def.

Black levels are satisfyingly deep. Colours are punchy when needed yet desaturated when the tone of the show demands it, and with no loss of clarity of sharpness. While we did spot some (very) infrequent instances of banding and crush, more serious encoding issues, such as artefacting and aliasing, are nowhere to be seen.

Audio: Just as impressive are the DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtracks that accompany each episode. Loud and rowdy (particularly when there's a fight – which happens fairly often), they exhibit a healthy dynamic range, plenty of positional effects and make riotous use of the LFE channel. *Neighbours*, this ain't.

Extras: The bonus content follows the pattern laid down by the first season. You get chat-tracks for five episodes, pop-up Twitter commentaries for two more episodes, breakdowns of the clues buried in the title sequences for each episode, 12 *Banshee: Origins* shorts, deleted scenes and much more.



Kai Proctor demonstrates that the Amish play a mean game of baseball



HCC VERDICT

Banshee: The Complete Second Season

→ HBO Home Entertainment

→ All-region BD → £50 Approx

WE SAY: There's no crime in wanting to own this superb show on Blu-ray

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★





Vincent Price: the man who put the arch in arch-villain

The Price is right for horror fans

Limited Edition boxset harbours plenty of Gothic treats for aficionados of '60s fright flicks



→ VINCENT PRICE IN SIX GOTHIC TALES BY EDGAR ALLAN POE

Between 1959 and 1964, B-movie purveyor Roger Corman directed a cycle of eight critically-acclaimed films based on the work of Edgar Allan Poe. Seven of these starred Vincent Price, six of which are collected in this limited edition Blu-ray boxset – sadly, Arrow was unable to licence *The Masque of the Red Death* from StudioCanal.

Both *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Pit and the Pendulum* have been released on BD before, but anthology outing *Tales of Terror*, horror-comedy *The Raven*, the misappropriated *The Haunted Palace* (actually an adaptation of H.P. Lovecraft's *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, albeit book-ended by Poe's poem) and the Hitchcockian *The Tomb of Ligeia* all make their hi-def debut here. This adds up to a superb set of '60s horror cinema that no fan of the genre should ignore.

Picture: The AVC 2.35:1 1080p encodes of *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Pit and the Pendulum* will be familiar to anyone who picked up the distributor's original standalone releases, as these are exactly the same discs.

As such, the real interest here lies with the subsequent quartet of titles (all also given AVC 2.35:1 1080p encodes) and once again the most significant problems (some softness and a slight roughness to the image) clearly stem from the source material rather than the encodes. Colour reproduction is rich

and vibrant across the board, while detailing is constantly above average, outside of some understandably fuzzy opticals.

Audio: Don't expect any whizz-bang trickery here. Instead, Arrow has decided to stick with lossless DTS-HD MA presentations of the original mono soundtracks. While this obviously makes for a somewhat sedate experience, the Blu-ray tracks handle all of the dialogue, Foley effects and music very well, with no trace of hiss or distortion.

Extras: Arrow continues to impress with its treatment of classic cinema on BD, digging up a treasure trove of goodies for fans of Vincent Price, Roger Corman and Edgar Allan Poe alike.

All bar *The Fall of the House of Usher* offer an Isolated Music & Effects track (DTS-HD MA 1.0), while *...Usher*, *The Pit and the Pendulum* and *The Tomb of Ligeia* also muster a selection of very informative audio commentaries.

The six discs also host a wide array of new and archival featurettes and documentaries covering subjects as diverse as the careers of Roger Corman and Peter Lorre, the history of film adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft, and even the role cats have played in horror films over the decades.

Trailers, interviews and other archival treats can also be found in abundance across the set.

In place of the usual booklets for each disc, the set includes a handsome 200-page hardback tome packed with essays about each of the films, plus reprints of the '60s Dell Comics adaptations of *Tales of Terror*, *The Raven* and *The Tomb of Ligeia*.



HCC VERDICT

Vincent Price in Six Gothic Tales by Edgar Allan Poe

→ Arrow Video → Region B BD
→ £70 Approx

WE SAY: The ultimate Blu-ray love letter to Corman, Price and Poe

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

I'm All Right Jack

StudioCanal → Region B BD & R2 DVD
£25 Approx



The Boulting Brothers' sequel to their 1956 hit *Private's Progress* takes aim at the changing face of industry in the

UK during the '50s, with both the unions and management square in its sights. Ian Carmichael stars as the bumbling Oxford graduate who gets a job at his uncle's weapons factory (only to end up the patsy in a money-making scheme), but Peter Sellers gets all the biggest laughs as the Marxist ideologue shop steward. Thankfully, while the film's satirical edge has been blunted slightly over the years, the newly restored 1.66:1 1080p encode on this Blu-ray remains razor-sharp.



The Girl Who Knew Too Much

Arrow Video → Region B BD & R2 DVD
£23 Approx



This 1963 Hitchcock pastiche may not be one of Mario Bava's very best movies, but its importance in the

development of the giallo genre cannot be understated. This is clearly something that the folks at Arrow Video understand all-to-well, as evidenced by this wonderful Blu-ray release, which includes restored versions of both the original and longer international cuts of the film. The hi-def platter is also accompanied by a superb array of extra features, including a fact-packed chat-track by critic Tim Lucas and an interview with actor John Saxon.



The Killers

Arrow Academy → Region B BD
£23 Approx



Having already given us a Blu-ray edition of Don Siegel's 1964 take on Hemingway's *The Killers* early last year,

Arrow returns with an HD outing for Robert Siodmak's superior 1946 adaptation. This legendary film noir cuts a striking figure, thanks to a restored AVC 1.37:1 1080p black-and-white encode that emphasises the masterful use of light and shadow throughout the film. The disc also hosts a fascinating set of extras, including three radio adaptations, a half-hour video essay comparing the various screen adaptations, and an hour-long piece that deconstructs four key scenes.



Intolerance

Eureka! The Masters of Cinema Series
Region B BD → £20 Approx



How do you follow up the biggest film the world has ever seen? In the case of *The Birth of a Nation* director D.W.

Griffith, the only possible answer was to go even bigger. One of the masterpieces of the silent era, *Intolerance* is a 167-minute epic that makes Peter Jackson's *Hobbit* trilogy look rather puny as it intercuts between four parallel storylines set hundreds of years apart that highlight man's intolerance to man across the ages. This sumptuous two-disc BD boasts a good-looking restoration, two re-edits of stories from the movie and an interview with film historian Kevin Brownlow.



Cinema at its best. Blu-ray not so much

This new boxset serves up plenty of extras, but relies on the same old high-definition masters

→ STANLEY KUBRICK: THE MASTERPIECE COLLECTION

Stanley Kubrick only made 13 feature films over the course of 46 years, but they remain 13 of the most influential and enjoyable flicks in the history of American cinema.

This new Blu-ray boxset collects together eight of his best-known: *Lolita* (1962), *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Barry Lyndon* (1975), *The Shining* (1980), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). The most notable omissions are *Fear and Desire* (1953) and *Spartacus* (1960), both of which are also available on Blu-ray here in the UK.

We can only presume that Warner was either unable to license those two titles for inclusion in this new set (as was the case with *Dr. Strangelove* and its previous *Visionary Filmmaker Collection* BD boxset), or simply wasn't interested in doing so.

Picture: This £130 package does little more than pull together a host of previously available discs in shiny new packaging, meaning that Kubrick fans have to put up with the same old 1080p encodes.

The undoubted highlight is Sony's 4K restoration of *Dr. Strangelove*, which still impresses as much as it did back in 2009. *2001: A Space Odyssey* also dazzles, while *Lolita* and *Barry Lyndon* both look extremely authentic. However, the HD masters for *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Shining* and *Full Metal Jacket* look tired and could do with new scans. Worst of all is *Eyes Wide Shut*, which appears very noisy and inconsistent for a film made just 15 years ago.



Audio: While *Lolita* sticks with a DTS-HD MA presentation of its original mono soundtrack, the rest of the films are presented as 5.1 mixes. The quality of these tracks varies as greatly as that of the hi-def imagery – the worst offender, once again, being the curiously flat and lifeless *Eyes Wide Shut*.

Extras: All of the extras that appeared on the original standalone disc releases are re-served here, and the set also includes the bonus disc housing the feature-length *Stanley Kubrick: A Life in Pictures* and *O Lucky Malcolm!* documentaries from the earlier *Visionary Filmmaker Collection* boxset.

There is some fresh content, though: a second bonus disc housing three further documentaries (*Kubrick Remembered*, *Stanley Kubrick in Focus* and *Once Upon a Time... A Clockwork Orange*); a fantastic 80-page hardback (packed with production art, storyboards, photos and other miscellany); and a reproduction art print.



HCC VERDICT

Stanley Kubrick: The Masterpiece Collection

→ Warner Bros. → All-region BD

→ £130 Approx

WE SAY: An enticing Blu-ray boxset despite the lack of new HD masters

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Having the time of your life

Ignore the naysayers, this new Who is as good as it ever was



→ DOCTOR WHO: THE COMPLETE EIGHTH SERIES

Last year saw the BBC's popular Saturday evening sci-fi series undergo another period of transition, introducing a new actor in the lead role. Unsurprisingly, Peter Capaldi's spiky portrayal of The Doctor upset some fans, but it was clearly a calculated move on the part of showrunner Steven Moffat, shaking up the status quo to keep the series feeling fresh and unpredictable.

The result is a collection of 12 episodes that finds *Doctor Who* confidently testing the limits of what it is capable of in its latest incarnation. Yes, there are a few missteps along the way (Peter Harness' bafflingly stupid *Kill the Moon* and Frank Cottrell Boyce's forgettable *In the Forest of the Night*), but the highs (Moffat's provocative *Listen* and newcomer Jamie Mathieson's sensational double-header of *Mummy on the Orient Express* and *Flatline*) more than make up for these occasional lapses in quality.

Picture: Each episode is presented on Blu-ray with an AVC 1.78:1 1080i50 encode – and, befitting a show with so many cinematic aspirations (including the hiring of accomplished filmmakers Ben Wheatley and Rachel Talalay to helm a couple of episodes each), the results are absolutely wonderful.

While the stories may get a little darker in tone this year, the imagery remains as richly coloured and punchy as you could hope for. Edges are sharp and black levels are uniformly deep. The only minor



HCC VERDICT

Doctor Who: The Complete Eighth Series
→ BBC Worldwide

→ All-region BD → £50 Approx

WE SAY: Quality extras and excellent AV make this a sci-fi stunner

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

imperfections stem from budgetary issues concerning the show's VFX.

Audio: These DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes do a fine job of supporting the stylish visuals. Directional effects are convincing and extend naturally into the surround speakers, while dialogue is clean and prioritised. And, although not reaching *Jurassic Park* levels, the LFE channel is regularly engaged and has plenty of impact. Really rather impressive.

Extras: Enjoyable bonus bits include commentaries on four episodes, two 45-minute TV specials (*The Ultimate Time Lord* and *The Ultimate Companion*) hosted by Peter Davison, 12 behind-the-scenes featurettes and a 45-minute 'World Tour' video that focuses primarily on fans around the globe and their Who-related creative endeavours.

Patema Inverted

Anime Limited → Region B BD & R2 DVD
£20 Approx



Yasuhiro Yoshiura's charming animation takes the notion of opposing points of view literally. While exploring the tunnels her people call home, Princess Patema falls down a shaft into

a place of oppositional gravity, where everything is upside down and she is in danger of falling into the sky. There she meets a boy who dreams of flying, and together they conspire to escape the land's tyrannical ruler and learn the truth about their worlds.

This intriguing and fun anime arrives on BD with plenty of extras, Japanese and English DTS-HD 5.1 mixes and a lush 1.78:1 1080p encode that revels in the film's vertiginous visuals.



The Congress

StudioCanal → Region B BD
£23 Approx



This sci-fi curio from *Waltz with Bashir* director Ari Folman finds Robin Wright playing herself, and

being pressured by a Hollywood studio into signing over her likeness so that she can exist as a digital duplicate to be cast in whatever they want. It's a great idea, and one that could serve as a brilliant satire of the industry, but *The Congress* merely uses it as the springboard into a journey into psychedelic animation that proves every bit as baffling as it is watchable. While this UK Blu-ray looks and sounds great, it's let down by a feeble collection of bonus features.



Remember Me

ITV Studios → R2 DVD
£15 Approx



This enjoyable three-part BBC ghost story thrives on a pair of superb performances from Michael Palin as

the abrasive old man at the heart of the mystery and Jodie Comer as an inquisitive young care assistant. Given how good the show looked in HD on TV, it's a shame that distributor ITV Studios has opted to bypass Blu-ray and make the miniseries a DVD-only title. The resulting anamorphic 1.78:1 transfer remains suitably eerie, but struggles to render shadow detail in darker scenes. To make matters worse, the disc contains no extras whatsoever.



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SOUND & VISION



Steve May and Anton van Beek get sore thumbs with six of the gaming world's biggest new titles



Assassins Creed Unity

Ubisoft, Xbox One/PS4/PC, £55 Approx

You can't approach *Assassins Creed Unity* without first acknowledging that it's an extraordinary bug fest. This has been much documented online, and when you do come across coding issues it's difficult not to laugh out loud. But this shouldn't detract from what is a fairly solid addition to the free-running franchise.

The storyline is character rich and the graphical representation of Revolutionary Paris impressive (odd frame-rate issues notwithstanding). Night follows day, and the weather can be inclement. Indeed, this immersive world is the title's biggest appeal. The parkour mechanics have been polished – leaping and climbing around Paris is pretty slick – and all the while the soundtrack is outstanding, with a great 360-degree ambience to the gameplay.

Yet *Unity* takes hours to progress through – changes to the combat system have made it much tougher – and there's a lot here which just follows what we've seen before. If stealthy murders are losing their appeal you'll probably find yourself distracted by the natty visuals.



Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare

Activision, Xbox One/Xbox 360/PS4/PS3/PC, £50 Approx

...*Advanced Warfare* has aspirations beyond those of the typical *Call of Duty* game. Finally shaking off the ghosts of the *Modern Warfare* line, this instalment sees the franchise going full sci-fi with *Edge of Tomorrow*-style exoskeletons that grant various power-ups, including invisibility and enhanced jumping capabilities (more proof that vertical attacks are the current 'big thing' in the FPS genre).

That said, behind all the game's new tricks and graphical flair (including a not-quite photo-realistic Kevin Spacey as the megalomaniacal villain) ...*Advanced Warfare* follows the basic pattern of previous games fairly closely. Cue lots of corridor shooting, plus a series of spectacular gunfights on the streets of futuristic world cities. But there are enough new ideas and tactics here to excite.

The single-player campaign is the appetiser to a smörgåsbord of multiplayer modes, where the exo-suits really come into their own. The ability to leap around like a psychopathic flea adds tactical depth when it comes to taking on human rather than A.I. opponents.



DriveClub

Sony Computer Entertainment, PS4, £55 Approx

Visually beautiful and refreshingly accessible, *DriveClub* is an automotive sim with an arcade bent, and as such it's a tad more fun than *Forza*. You start with a hot hatch and work your way up to better wheels. Racing solo, progressing from Rookie to Legend, takes some time to unlock the best cars – in multiplayer mode, you'll make far faster progress. Up to six players can race against each other online as part of a club, and compete in mini challenges. Generally speaking, the psychics are excellent but not ruinously punishable. If you want to demolition derby you can, but you lose points for damage. However, the game is ultimately lacking in flourish and features. *Burnout* it isn't, and that's a problem when it comes to longevity.

On the plus side, the graphics are borderline sensational. Vehicles gleam with a photorealistic sheen and the backgrounds are detailed and lush. It's so nice you might well want just want to spend a Sunday afternoon poodling around the imaginary tracks and soaking up the scenery.





Far Cry 4

Ubisoft, Xbox One/Xbox 360/PS4/PS3/PC, £50 Approx

While each of Ubisoft's previous sandbox shooters has felt like a reinvention of the franchise, this year's offering hews so close to the structure of *Far Cry 3* that it sometimes feels like a re-skin. But does it really matter when the end result is this much fun?

The convoluted plot basically boils down to an enormous game world with countless missions to play through – many of which (including outpost raids, climbing towers to unlock new areas on the map, and hunting wild animals) will be familiar from *Far Cry 3*. Yet this follow-up adds some new twists, including buddying up with a ghost tiger during hallucinatory trips to Shangri-La and riding elephants into battle, plus the addition of a grapple hook that grants you access to ever more remote areas of the map. You can also team-up with pals online to battle through the Campaign mode, or try one of the competitive multiplayer options.

The game world is beautifully rendered and sonically immersive, and the overriding sense of enjoyment means the lack of real originality is easy to overlook.



Halo: The Master Chief Collection

Microsoft, Xbox One, £50 Approx

This compilation of all things *Halo* will be a no-brainer for Xbox gamers who have grown up under the FPS tutelage of the Master Chief. All the original games have been remastered for inclusion (which means they still play exactly like they did originally but there's more texture to the visuals) and there's a planet-load of extras to explore, too.

Featured are *Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary*, *Halo 2*, *Halo 3* and *Halo 4* campaigns, with all multiplayer and DLC content including more than 100 multiplayer and Spartan Ops maps. The package also includes the *Halo 5: Guardians* multiplayer beta. As a value proposition it's phenomenal.

There's something refreshing about returning to the original Halo adventures, especially post-*Destiny*. The gameplay holds up well and there are nice surprises, such as re-worked HD cut scenes. *Halo 2* has been rendered at 1080p, a big improvement. All play at a smooth 60Hz, too. Also bundled is access to *Halo: Nightfall*, an episodic live action show produced by Ridley Scott, although in truth this feels like a Syfy channel reject and is pretty awful.



LEGO Batman 3: Beyond Gotham

WB Interactive Entertainment, Xbox One/Xbox 360/PS4/PS3/PC/Wii U, £40 Approx

The most expansive adventure yet for the brick-built caped crusader and his trusty companion see them venture out of Gotham and into deep space for a romp that utilises 150 characters from the DC Universe, each with their own quirks and powers. Indeed, it's this inspired choice of Justice League and related cast members (including Adam West!) that makes this kidult title such fun.

If the game has a flaw, it's that it's slow to start. The opening level is a familiar chase through the sewers of Gotham, no different to what we've seen before. But once you blast off in the Bat Rocket, things pick up dramatically. Brainiac is shrinking cities across the universe, and only Batman and the JLA can stop him, provided they collect enough Lantern Rings from different Lantern Worlds. Settle back and enjoy the barrage of gags and DC-related nonsense that ensues.

The game world itself feels huge, and visually it's an absolute blast. The level of detail and animation is monumental, and those ever-changing character theme tunes always raise a smile. Bat-tastic!



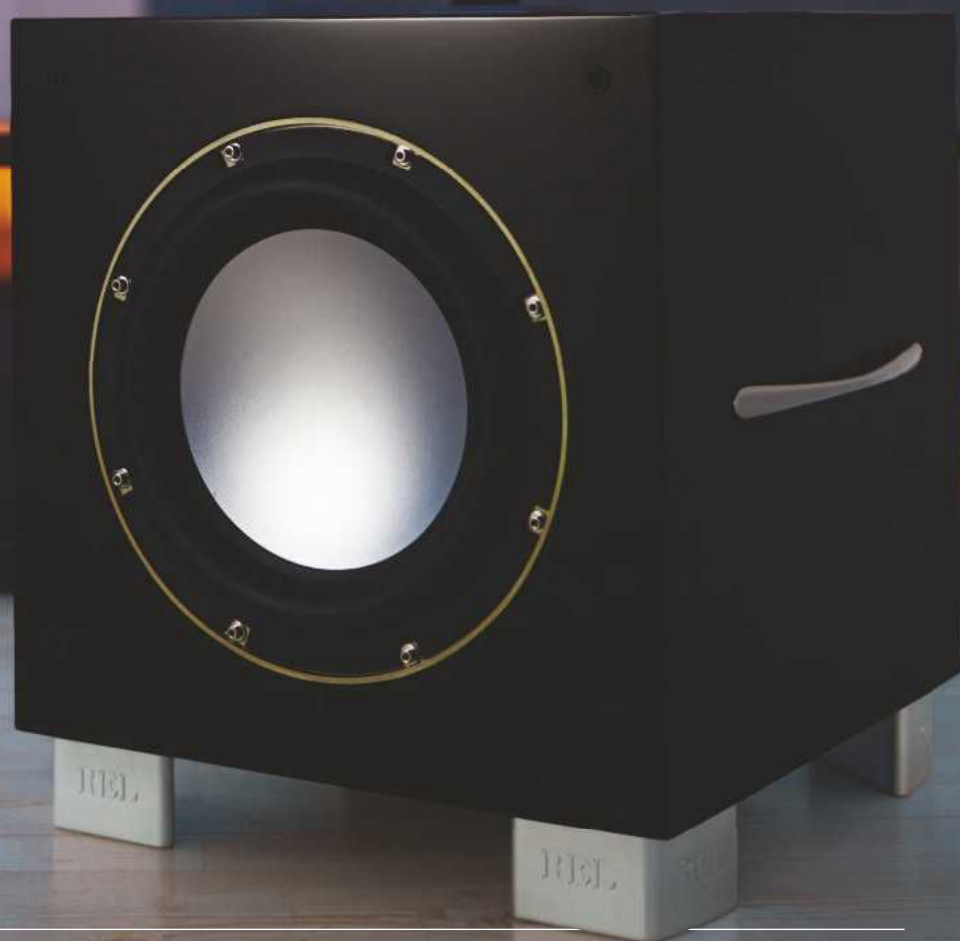
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HCC RATINGS KEY...	
Outstanding	★★★★★
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Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

TOP 10 TELEVISIONS

All prices are approx and may have changed

**Sony KD-65X9005B** → £3,600

★★★★★

A groundbreaking set from Sony. The 'Wedge' cabinet design affords room for a best-in-class audio performance from the side-mounted speakers, while imagery is hard to fault, with crisp 4K visuals and impressive motion. *HCC #236*

**Samsung UE65HU8500** → £4,000 ★★★★★

This second-gen 4K flagship is a first-rate (curved) flatscreen with colour-rich, lethally-sharp images. The external connections box provides welcome futureproofing. *HCC #234*

**Samsung UE55HU7500** → £2,300 ★★★★★

Don't want the curved form or higher price of the HU8500 range? Then step down to this flat model. No One Connect box, but otherwise it's equally impressive in PQ terms. *HCC #239*

**Sony KDL-50W829** → £900 ★★★★★

Impressively affordable, Sony's 50in LED stands out courtesy of brilliant motion handling and sharp Full HD imagery. The new 2014 user interface offers a few Smart tricks, too. *HCC #233*

**Panasonic TX-42AS600** → £430 ★★★★★

An example of the value that can be found in modern-day Full HD sets. This 42-incher offers the best elements of Panasonic's Smart system, dynamic images and a great price. *HCC #240*

**LG 65UB980V** → £3,000 ★★★★★

LG's 65in 4K flagship hides its size well courtesy of a super-cool bezel/stand design. Performance is generally excellent, barring a few backlight niggles, and the onboard speakers are fab. *HCC #241*

**Panasonic TX-48AS640** → £700 ★★★★★

Another relatively affordable Full HD Panasonic LED TV that's well worth an audition. Contrast and motion handling both impress here. Average sonics, though. *HCC #241*

**Samsung UE40H6400** → £650 ★★★★★

This mid-market TV will probably sell like hotcakes. It ignores 4K in favour of Full HD, and combines a pleasing AV performance with plenty of useful Smart features. *HCC #236*

**Finlux 50F8075-T** → £600 ★★★★★

The best screen we've seen yet from the direct-retail corp, this 50-incher matches its affordability with a great user interface and solid, but not awe-inspiring, HD visuals. *HCC #234*

**Panasonic TX-50AX802** → £1,600 ★★★★★

This second-gen 4K TV again offers HDMI 2.0 and DisplayPort connectivity, joined by a well-contrasted colour-rich image and elegant design. Netflix 4K support added by firmware. *HCC #237*

TECH INFO: TELEVISIONS



What? No plasma?: The TV market is now dominated by LED-lit LCD screens, reaching sizes up to 90in. Manufacture and sale of plasma display panels (PDPs), which previously came into play above 42in, has all but ceased, although you may still find some end-of-line stock. With LED comes newer technologies. 4K models with a native resolution of 3,840 x 2,160 should at least be on your audition list if you're thinking of a new display; curved models, from the likes of Samsung and LG, are also a consideration if you want to really impress the neighbours...



Active or Passive: At the beginning of the 3D revolution, most TVs featured the Active system that uses relatively expensive, powered 3D specs to deliver Full HD images to each eye. Passive 3D TVs, which are increasingly common and now sold by LG, Philips, Toshiba, Sony and Panasonic, have a filter over the screen and use non-powered specs with polarising filters. The glasses are cheap as chips, but the resolution of Full HD 3D is halved to 540 lines horizontally (but remains at 1,920 vertically). Glasses-free 3D, heralded by Toshiba's ZL2 TV, hasn't caught on.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY MOVIES

**The LEGO Movie 3D**

A fantastic family blockbuster (complete with LEGO versions of Batman and Superman), this gorgeous-looking 'toon packs a 5.1 punch and enough smart gags to keep you laughing all the way to the toy shop.

★★★★★

**The Wizard of Oz 3D**

The classic fantasy is given a painstaking 3D makeover that goes far beyond the 'pop-up storybook' effect you may have feared. The 2D version is present too, while among the extras is a new 69-minute documentary.

★★★★★

**Guardians of the Galaxy**

The Blu-ray for Marvel's blockbustin' laughter-packed space adventure sports an impeccable 2.40:1 AVC encode, some worthwhile bonus bits and a stonking DTS-HD Master Audio 7.1 soundtrack.

★★★★★

**Edge of Tomorrow 3D**

Tom Cruise's oh-so-enjoyable sci-fi caper didn't light up the box office, but it should be given a warm welcome on BD. Image quality here is sublime, and the 7.1 soundmix marries brutal bass with whizzy effects.

★★★★★

**Withnail and I: Limited Edition Boxset**

The revered '80s comedy gets the red carpet treatment, with a new 2K restoration improving vastly on previous releases. Extras on this limited edition set include a 200-page book!

★★★★★

Top 10 BLU-RAY PLAYERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1**  **Oppo BDP-103D → £600 ★★★★★**
 Oppo's first deck for two years was worth waiting for. The universal BDP-103EU featured a class-leading build and all manner of bonus goodies, including twin HDMI inputs. AV performance was faultless, and the onscreen menus superb. This newer model, the BDP-103D, adds Darbee Visual Presence processing for you to play with. *HCC #228*
- 2**  **Oppo BDP-105D → £1,100 ★★★★★**
 This heavyweight deck builds upon the premium picture performance of the BDP-103D with a wealth of audiophile upgrades – if you're serious about music, check it out. *HCC #234*
- 3**  **Sony BDP-S7200 → £220 ★★★★★**
 A Sony deck without the curious angular design, the BDP-S7200 offers SACD support, hi-res audio streaming and 4K upscaling that's worth investigation. Not too pricey, either. *HCC #239*
- 4**  **Panasonic DMP-BDT700 → £500 ★★★★★**
 Claiming THX-certified 4K upscaling and HDMI 2.0 60p passthrough, this mid-range deck from Panasonic is a good partner for a modern display. Great audio option, too. *HCC #237*
- 5**  **Samsung BD-H6500 → £130 ★★★★★**
 Our current fave bargain BD deck – actually Samsung's 'flagship' model – is packed with Smart features, including support for the brand's multiroom system, and super-quick operation. *HCC #236*
- 6**  **Denon DBT-3313UD → £900 ★★★★★**
 As a 'transport', this universal deck lacks built-in decoders and analogue outs, but partner it with one of the brand's AVRs via Denon Link HD and you'll be rewarded. *HCC #217*
- 7**  **LG BP645 → £100 ★★★★★**
 An affordable, likeable offering from LG. The BP645 claims Spotify compatibility and Wi-Fi-enabled headphone listening among its bonus features. Slim but lightweight design. *HCC #236*
- 8**  **Sony BDP-S5200 → £100 ★★★★★**
 Using a compact bedroom-friendly build, Sony's quirky-looking deck is a good budget option, but not as Smart or as smooth to use as some of its price-point rivals. *HCC #236*
- 9**  **Pioneer BDP-160 → £130 ★★★★★**
 The successor to the BDP-150 adds integrated Wi-Fi, making media file playback simpler. The Smart cupboard is still practically empty, but SACD support softens the blow. *HCC #227*
- 10**  **Toshiba BDX5500 → £120 ★★★★★**
 The key attraction of Toshiba's £120 player (aside from its 3D, Miracast, 4K scaling and DLNA features) is its small form factor and vertical alignment. Good for space-tight setups. *HCC #238*

TECH INFO: BLU-RAY PLAYERS

Matching your deck to your AV receiver: Blu-ray decks are designed to deliver top-notch images but Blu-ray is also about enjoying superior quality sound. When choosing a player, bear in mind the connectivity and decoding features of your AV receiver. If you're still using an older model that doesn't offer HDMI inputs, then you'll need a Blu-ray player with multichannel analogue audio outputs to enjoy decoded hi-res surround sound formats. Similarly, older but still HDMI-equipped receivers may not be able to cope with 3D video signals, in which case you'll need a deck with dual HDMI outputs – one channelling audio to your receiver amp, the other piping video direct to your TV.

What about the PlayStation?: Sony's console still represents an easy path to hi-def heaven. For a low-budget home cinema system, the £200 PS3 Slim (160GB) makes a decent choice – especially if you like playing games (in 3D, if you fancy it). Control via a joypad is a pain, though, and the console runs more noisily than most BD spinners. The newer, more expensive PS4 is a much better gaming machine, but won't play CDs!



DEMO DELIGHT

Edge of Tomorrow: This enjoyable, FX-packed Tom Cruise sci-fi scooped the Best Picture Quality gong in our Movie Awards. Shot on film for a realistic aesthetic, it transfers over to Blu-ray with a pristine 1080p image. The detailing is simply astonishing!

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TOP 10 PROJECTORS

All prices are approx
and may have changed**Sony VPL-VW500ES** → £8,800

★★★★★

Sony's second-gen 4K projector is around half the price of its VPL-VW1100ES and comes with HDMI 2.0 chipper and Triluminos colour wizardry. Auditioning this classy PJ is a no-brainer. *HCC #228*

**JVC DLA-X500R** → £5,000 ★★★★★

Armed with a more adept third generation of the brand's proprietary e-shift technology, the X500R continues JVC's winning ways – contrast rich, sharp and full of tweaks. *HCC #232*

**Epson EH-TW7200** → £1,900 ★★★★★

Priced to appeal to those unable to dabble in the £3,000 market, Epson's mid-ranger is a great purchase. No frame interpolation on offer, but colours, contrast and brightness impress. *HCC #232*

**JVC DLA-X700R** → £7,300 ★★★★★

A hefty chunk more expensive than the X500R, but with an improved contrast performance (and more flexible installation options) that will reward those who splash the cash. *HCC #238*

**Optoma HD50** → £1,000 ★★★★★

With a retweaked user interface that improves upon previous Optoma light-cannons, the 12V-trigger-toting HD50 is a brilliant budget buy. *HCC #239*

**Epson EH-TW6600W** → £1,700 ★★★★★

This offers plenty of bang for your bigscreen buck, including wireless HD (with switching skills), flexible setup, useful processing features and a punchy, vivid image quality. *HCC #241*

**BenQ W1070+** → £650 ★★★★★

An accomplished low-budget DLP model, the W1070+ offers ISF-certified calibration and a 12V trigger in conjunction with a sharp, bright, detailed performance. Bit of a bargain! *HCC #240*

**Philips Screeneo HDPI590** → £1,500 ★★★★★

Neatly designed, the Screeneo offers ultra-short throw projection thrills, albeit at 720p (and the DVB tuner is SD). Good speakers and networking skills complete a nice package. *HCC #233*

**Sony VPL-HW55ES** → £2,800 ★★★★★

Not one of Sony's 4K models, but this keenly priced Full HD projector delivers where it counts, with solid calibration options, simple setup and brilliant 2D visuals. No 12V trigger. *HCC #230*

**Epson EH-TW9200W** → £3,000 ★★★★★

A brilliant mid-range projector with wireless HD transmission and ISF certification, yet the noise generated when running in 'Normal' lamp mode could be a concern for some. *HCC #231*

TECH INFO: PROJECTORS



Installation: Although projectors can be temporarily placed on a cupboard, stand or shelf situated at the rear of the room (use the adjustable feet on its base to level the image so that it aligns with the screen), a much better long-term solution is to mount it on your ceiling with an appropriate bracket. Projectors can be quite heavy, though, so it's important to ensure that the bracket is attached firmly – ideally, it should be secured to a joist. Position your PJ so that an imaginary line from its lens to the opposite side of the room hits the screen exactly half-way along its width. The location of your screen should therefore dictate where your projector is. A decent tape-measure or laser pointer will help you to determine the position.

Throw distance: Throw distance specifies the distance between the projector and screen for a focused image of given size. As the vast majority of projectors are equipped with a zoom lens, minimum and maximum throw distances are often specified – say, 3.01m to 6.08m for a 100in. 16:9 image. Shorter throw distances are ideal for smaller rooms, and longer ones for larger rooms. Simple.

Throw ratio: Sometimes, a manufacturer will quote a throw ratio rather than a throw distance. This is basically the throw distance divided by the image width. To get the projected image size, divide the distance between projector and screen by the specified figure. Once again, the inclusion of a zoom lens means that upper and lower figures are usually specified.

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Top 10 SPEAKERS

All prices are approx and may have changed



B&W 683 Theatre 5.1 → £2,750

★★★★★

The first step on the floorstanding ladder in B&W's speaker stable, the revamped 600 Series incorporates new tweeter and bass driver designs and offers absurd value for money. Not the prettiest cabinets, but you really won't care. *HCC #234*



KEF R Series 7.1 → £6,500 ★★★★★

A 7.1 array mixing dipolar and direct surrounds, this authoritative package takes its cues from KEF's Blade concept speaker and offers faultless, largescale home cinema sonics. *HCC #217*



B&W MT-60D → £2,000 ★★★★★

This 5.1 set sits at the upper end of the sub/sat market, but buyers are rewarded by a potent performance, with the PVID subwoofer dazzling in particular. They look lovely, too. *HCC #212*



DALI Rubicon LCR 5.1 → £6,275 ★★★★★

Trickle-down tech from DALI's high-end Epicon speakers (including ribbon/dome hybrid tweeters) squeezed into on-wall cabinets – supremely adept with music and movies. *HCC #238*



Wharfedale Diamond 100 HCP → £950 ★★★★★

Yet another excellent affordable package from Wharfedale, the Diamond 100 HCP offers a sound quality beyond what you might expect from its sub-£1,000 ticket. Maturely styled. *HCC #224*



Kreisel Sound Quattro 7.2 → £8,500 ★★★★★

Mixing two mammoth woofers with some surprisingly manageable multi-tweeter speakers (including TriFX surrounds) this US package is supremely assured. *HCC #232*



Artcoustic Spitfire SL 7.2 → £17,000 ★★★★★

Slimmed-down cabinets now even easier to install on-wall or behind a screen, with a multi-driver design ensuring they're easy to drive to high SPLs. Ideal for dedicated rooms. *HCC #233*



Tannoy Precision Series 5.1 → £4,450 ★★★★★

These speakers' classic look belies the brand's hi-fi heritage, but this multichannel setup works wonders with movies, too – a rich, large and dynamic sound is on offer. *HCC #226*



Monitor Audio Radius R90HT1 → £1,500 ★★★★★

The long-loved Radius speakers have been revamped with new drivers and rear ports, and this 5.1 set provides a clear, detailed sound with plenty of heft. Looks good in white, too. *HCC #230*



Roth Oli RA 5.1 → £850 ★★★★★

A floorstanding array with neat design and reassuring build, this value-for-money pack delivers an impressive slice of scale to go with its full-range prowess. *HCC #233*

TECH INFO: SPEAKERS



Centre speaker: Handles most of the dialogue and onscreen effects. Should be positioned above or below the screen as close to it as possible. Of course, if you're using a projector screen, it should ideally be placed behind it.

Front speakers: Left and right speakers should be positioned either side of the screen, in line with the centre. Turn the speakers in slightly to face the listener if there isn't an even movement of sound across the front of the room.

Subwoofer: Can be positioned wherever it sounds best or can be tucked out of sight due to the non-directional nature of low-frequency signals. Be aware that close positioning in corners or next to walls can create a boomy effect.

Surrounds: Position alongside the listener, pointing in or slightly behind the ears for a good surround effect. The back wall is not a good position for surrounds – it is, in fact, where you should locate the sixth and seventh speakers (rears) in a traditional 7.1 array.

DEMO DELIGHT

Godzilla: Hollywood tackles the iconic aquatic beastie once again, and the Blu-ray comes armed with a DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix that's dynamic, powerful, aggressive, detailed and expansive from start to finish. Check out Chapter 8's M.U.T.O. circling sequence for a masterclass in precision and control.

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TOP 10 AV RECEIVERS/AV PROCESSORS

All prices are approx
and may have changed**Yamaha RX-A3040** → £2,000

A superb flagship AVR, this dovetails nine-channel amplification (and 11-channel processing) with a fluid, dynamic sonic signature and slick operation. Design and build impress, and it's Atmos ready for when you are. *HCC #239*

**Anthem MRX-510** → £1,700 ★★★★★

The Canadian brand returns in style with an AVR that ignores streaming/networking features but boasts supreme room EQ and eats movie soundtracks for breakfast. *HCC #232*

**Arcam AVR750** → £4,000 ★★★★★

If all you want from an AV receiver is vast power and effortless performance, this high-end 7.1-channel beast is tailored to you. Little bonus features beyond audio networking. *HCC #225*

**Krell Foundation** → £6,500 ★★★★★

One of the US marque's more affordable offerings, the Foundation is a seven-channel processor that delivers an insightful, smooth and epic sound. And it looks fab. *HCC #224*

**Marantz NR-1605** → £600 ★★★★★

A brilliant option for those cowed by full-form AVRs, the NR-1605 sees Marantz retool its slender line to include integrated Wi-Fi and Bluetooth. Agile, sprightly and easy to use. *HCC #239*

**Onkyo TX-NR838** → £1,000 ★★★★★

A nicely-specced mid-range AVR, offering 5.1.2 Atmos playback (as well as regular 7.1) in addition to HDCP 2.2 support, which will please future-gazers. Crisp-sounding sonics. *HCC #240*

**Denon AVR-X4100W** → £1,300 ★★★★★

Denon's entry-point for Atmos offers 7 x 125W of amplification and built-in Wi-Fi/Bluetooth. An improved UI and Audyssey MultEQ XT32 aids installation. Fast, exciting sound *HCC #241*

**Primare SPA23** → £3,500 ★★★★★

A stripped-down five-channel amp that majors on sublime, and power-packed, multichannel delivery. Limited functionality, but that's not what this luxury slab is all about. *HCC #237*

**Pioneer VSX-924** → £500 ★★★★★

Pioneer's newest £500 model brings Bluetooth and Wi-Fi, an even better control app, HDMI 2.0 specification and under-the-hood tweaks. A great-value, good performer. *HCC #236*

**Yamaha RX-V577** → £500 ★★★★★

Loaded with DSP modes (some fun, some not) and Wi-Fi-enabled for audio streaming, this clean-sounding Yamaha is a great low-budget option. Bluetooth via optional dongle. *HCC #237*

TECH INFO: AV RECEIVERS



Tackling new heights: You may find your AV receiver offering Dolby Pro-Logic IIz, Audyssey DSX or DTS Neo: X post-processing – possibly all three. All of these can deliver two further Front Height channels, with the aim of adding weight and control to the front soundstage, particularly in terms of lifting the centre channel and adding scale to vertical surround effects – rainfall for example. The catch is that you will need to add two new physical speakers, mounted near your ceiling above the regular left and right channel cabinets, and make use of two of the receiver's channels of amplification. A newer alternative, Dolby Atmos, uses object-based encoded info rather than matrixed effects, for a more immersive experience. Atmos Blu-rays are slowly appearing, as are add-on speakers that work around the need for in-ceiling models.

How much power?: Many of the mass-market AV receiver manufacturers are involved in a specifications race to see who can say their model is the most powerful, which can be confusing for consumers. For instance, both Krell's £7,000 S-1500 seven-channel power amp and Yamaha's £500 RX-V675 both claim 7 x 150W – the important part is that Krell's figure is into an eight-ohm load with all channels driven, and that Yamaha's is with one channel into a four-ohm load, which is hardly a real-world situation. The best advice is ignore the numbers game and get a demo of your desired AVR with the same, or similar, speakers that you intend to partner it with.

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Top 10 SUBWOOFERS

All prices are approx & may have changed

- 

SVS SB-2000 → £650 ★★★★★
This follow up to the SB-1000, which incorporates a new 12in driver and revamped Sledge DSP amplifier, offers immense value for money. A mid-sized woofer that imbibes your Blu-rays with potent LFE, the SB-2000 sounds quick and taut, and is a perfect introduction to what a truly good sub can accomplish. HCC #233
- 

JL Audio Fathom F212 → £5,900 ★★★★★
The US brand arrives in the UK in style – this 2 x 12in, 3,000W brute not only looks gorgeous, it's capable of a mindblowing performance. Got a big room? Get one of these! HCC #214
- 

Tannoy TS2.12 → £550 ★★★★★
The TS2.12 is easily Tannoy's best woofer yet – using a 12in driver (opposite a passive 12in cone) and 500W amp to deliver a rich bass performance. Affordable and good-looking, too. HCC #208
- 

REL S-5 → £1,600 ★★★★★
A step up from the T series (below), this 12in model is large and weighty, with a performance level to match. Fast and tight but capable of dropping very low indeed. HCC #234
- 

Bowers & Wilkins DB1 → £3,250 ★★★★★
Featuring a bipolar arrangement of 12in drivers powered by 1,000W of amplification, B&W's stylish flagship sub is a faultless performer, offering both musicality and sheer muscle. HCC #197
- 

REL T-7 → £650 ★★★★★
The T-7 uses an 8in driver in tandem with a 10in passive radiator, and features simultaneous speaker-level and LFE inputs and Class A/B amplification. An excellent all-rounder. HCC #223
- 

Bowers & Wilkins PVID → £1,200 ★★★★★
One of the coolest-looking subs on the planet, B&W's PVID uses DSP trickery to craft an opulent low-end performance. The touch-sensitive OLED display is pure class. HCC #212
- 

JL Audio E-Sub e112 → £2,050 ★★★★★
This 12in, 1,500W model from JL Audio's 'entry-level' line seems pricey, but its performance, design and tuning options make the investment oh-so worthwhile. HCC #240
- 

REL Habitat 1 → £1,300 ★★★★★
With its LongBow wireless system and wall-mountable design, REL's newest woofer is aimed at those seeking discreet bass. Twin 6.5in drivers work fast and with considerable grip. HCC #231
- 

SVS SB12-NSD → £650 ★★★★★
A 12in driver squeezed into the smallest enclosure possible, the SB12-NSD packs a 400W Sledge amp and offers a weighty yet fast and accurate sound. Looks a bit bland, though. HCC #223

TECH INFO



Why use more than one sub?: Using two subwoofers (or perhaps four) should, in theory, bring huge rewards in terms of bass performance. But remember that LFE is a tricky beast to control. Running two subs may simply double problems in your room like room boom and suck-outs, where outgoing and reflected bass sounds cancel each other out. If you have some flexibility in where you place subwoofers, trial and error may well throw up some interesting results. The acoustics wizard Floyd E Toole (his book *Sound Reproduction: The Acoustics and Psychoacoustics of Loudspeakers and Rooms* is fine bedtime reading) suggests one LFE sub to either side of the room may be best for accuracy while placing them in the front corners would be best for overall bass power. Yet there is no hard and fast rule as to what will work best for every room, and you may find that simply using one (large) subwoofer is preferable as it's the easiest to get sounding right.

DEMO DELIGHT

The LEGO Movie: This colourful, great-looking animation from Warner Bros is a visual treat on Blu-ray, and matched by a 5.1 DTS-HD Master Audio mix that revels in its use of the LFE channel. Stonking bass is the order of the day here – the bangs, thumps and explosions of the manic 'toon action are underpinned by a forceful, full-bodied low-end that's guaranteed to get the most out of your subwoofer.

Top 5 HD GAMES



Ultra Street Fighter IV
New characters, stages and gameplay mechanics make this update of the four-year-old title the best beat-'em up around. If you're having a family row over what film to watch, this is the best way to settle it.
★★★★★



Forza Motorsport 5
This game's headline trick is delivering its huge car collection and decent selection of tracks in wonderfully detailed 1080p at a silky smooth 60fps. That it's not quite perfect – dodgy AI, for a start – is less important.
★★★★★



Alien Isolation
This fantastic 'survival-horror' captures the unsettling atmosphere of Ridley Scott's feature film with aplomb. The lighting effects and audio cues are suitably spooky, and the gameplay is nerve-shredding.
★★★★★



Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor
A third-person adventure set between the events of the *Hobbit* and *Rings* trilogies, Tolkien fans will lap this up. Graphically rich, and with a hard (but rewarding) learning curve.
★★★★★



Titanfall
EA redefines the online shooter with this breathtaking arena blaster that ups the ante on the competition with fluid run-and-gun mechanics, giant mechs you can take control of and gorgeous graphics.
★★★★★

TOP 10 ACCESSORIES

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1 Now TV box → £10 ★★★★★**
 An unqualified bargain, this Wi-Fi VOD streamer from Sky (and built upon Roku hardware) brings BBC iPlayer, Demand 5 and the Roku Channel Store to any HDMI-toting telly, plus subscription access to Sky Movies and Sky Sports. The quality of the adaptive bitrate streaming is impressive, and the £10 tag gets you P&P and an HDMI cable. *HCC #226*
- 2 Devolo dLAN 650 Triple+ starter pack → £120 ★★★★★**
 This package makes Powerline networking fast (claimed at up to 600Mbps) and easy. The three-port Ethernet extender is sleekly designed, and provides a regular plug socket, too. *HCC #239*
- 3 Dune HD Base 3D → £250 ★★★★★**
 A media player for the AV enthusiast. Full-width and fully-featured, it provides support for 3D BD rips and much more, with a slick user interface and plenty of connectivity. *HCC #235*
- 4 Sony MDR-HW700DS → £450 ★★★★★**
 Comfy cans supplied with an HDMI surround processor, enabling multichannel audio to be fed to a virtual 9.1-channel soundstage. The effect is superb – great for late-night listening. *HCC #234*
- 5 HDAnywhere mHub → £1,000 ★★★★★**
 An impressively flexible multiroom solution that allows HD video and audio to be sent via Cat cable to four displays from multiple sources. Includes HDMI mirroring, too. Handy. *HCC #240*
- 6 Philips Hue → £180 ★★★★★**
 These Wi-Fi enabled lightbulbs might be expensive (this £180 starter pack includes two, plus the Wi-Fi bridge) but making your own multicoloured lighting scheme is a blast. *HCC #220*
- 7 Monitor Audio Airstream A100 → £400 ★★★★★**
 Partner your TV with the speakers of your choice with this networked, AirPlay-streaming two-channel amp. Great, svelte design – bit awkward to control, though. *HCC #238*
- 8 Roku Streaming Stick → £50 ★★★★★**
 Adopting the same form as Google's Chromecast, this HDMI stick gives full access to Roku's lengthy channel list and enables content sharing from a smartphone. Good for old TVs. *HCC #235*
- 9 Microsoft Xbox One → £430 ★★★★★**
 Not as graphically potent as the PS4 (below) but the new Xbox lives up to its billing as a home entertainment hub – voice control and multi-tasking tricks prove very useful. *HCC #230*
- 10 Sony PlayStation 4 → £350 ★★★★★**
 The PS4 offers a killer gaming experience, with the under-the-hood power resulting in great-looking games. 3D Blu-ray playback has now been added via firmware. *HCC #229*

TECH INFO: MEDIA PLAYERS



What about my TV?: Most flatscreen TVs from the major brands (Sony, Samsung, Panasonic, LG, Toshiba and Sharp) also incorporate media player functionality, using Ethernet or Wi-Fi to stream from your home network, or from plugged-in USB drives. Most modern Blu-ray players offer this, too. However, file support is rarely as extensive as on dedicated devices from the likes of Western Digital and A.C. Ryan, and our experience shows some are more adept at playback from USB than over a network. Nor (obviously) is a TV or BD player portable. If your media collection extends beyond JPEGs and MP3s into lossless audio rips and esoteric HD video formats, then a standalone player is a good investment.

Storage: You can, if you really want, store all your files on a plethora of USB drives, or on your PC, but it's best to get a NAS (Network Attached Storage) device for simplified sharing of your media across a network with



multiple players, such as one from Netgear's ReadyNAS range (pictured). These dedicated devices often offer RAID array file backup, and are managed via browser software. Storage capacity can be anything from 1TB to 12TB and beyond.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY/DVD BOX SETS


The Walking Dead: The Complete Fourth Season

The popular horror series really hits its stride with this chilling collection of 16 episodes, and the Blu-ray release is no slouch either, mixing killer lossless audio with in-depth extras.

★★★★★


Fargo: The Complete First Season

Based upon the celebrated crime thriller from the Coen brothers, this 10-part FX network series is one of 2014's best – an addictive, brilliantly-cast black comedy. Good extras on this BD set, too.

★★★★★


The Werner Herzog Collection

Eight discs packing 18 of the filmmaker's earlier flicks (from 1967 to 1987). The HD presentations are strong, and Herzog pops up on numerous commentary tracks.

★★★★★


Video Nasties: The Definitive Guide Part Two

Superb three-disc DVD package partnering a feature-length documentary about the 'video nasties' craze of the 80s/90s with trailers/analysis of 83 of the controversial films in question.

★★★★★


Twin Peaks: The Entire Mystery

Both seasons of the US cult TV series and the prequel flick ...Fire Walk With Me are given a fan-pleasing 10-disc BD release, sporting 7.1 DTS-HD audio and a treasure trove of bonus bits.

★★★★★

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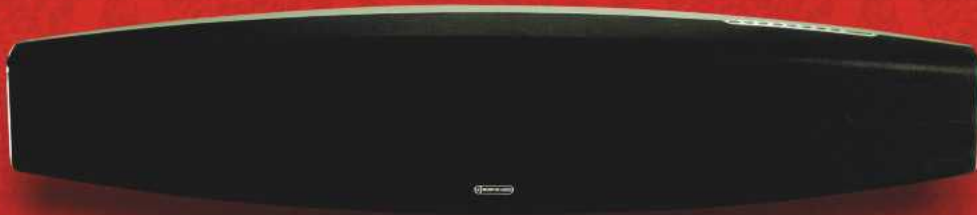
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TOP 5 PVRs

**Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription**

This triple-tuner PVR offers ultimate recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and awesome TiVo functionality. A no brainer if you're in a cable area

★★★★★

**Sky+HD, £subscription**

Sky's channel choice is second-to-none and its twin tuner 2TB PVR is a perfect partner. The recent EPG tweak is welcome and Anytime (the push VOD service) is brilliant for catching up on new movies

★★★★★

**Panasonic DMR-HW220, £250**

Panasonic's PVR mixes a 1TB hard drive with its Smart Viera functionality and media streaming – so at £250 it's an absolute steal, regardless of the uninspired design

★★★★★

**Pure Avalon 300R Connect, 1TB, £350**

Pure's debut Freeview+ HD offering is assured. While it can't match YouView for VOD content, the user interface here is unrivalled and four-way HDMI switching a welcome addition

★★★★★

**Panasonic DMR-BWT740, £500**

A 1TB Freeview+ twin-tuner PVR married to a BD player/burner = insane levels of recording/archiving flexibility. Ideal for programme hoarders, but not the slickest box to use

★★★★★

TOP 5 SOUNDBARS

**Yamaha YAS-103, £230**

Bluetooth-enabled and app-controllable, this single-enclosure solution boasts a great design and solid build. Audio from its 2.1-channel driver array is rich, clean and surprisingly potent

★★★★★

**Canton DM 50, £400**

This sturdily built soundbase speaker may lack HDMI inputs but makes up for it with Bluetooth streaming and a full-bodied 2.1-channel performance. Movies and music benefit from clarity and power

★★★★★

**Monitor Audio ASB-2, £1,000**

This premium proposition marries Monitor Audio's C-CAM drivers with AirPlay and DLNA music streaming. Performance is exemplary – powerful and polished in equal measure

★★★★★

**Philips HTL9100, £600**

A soundbar/sub that incorporates two removable side speakers to allow it to become a wireless 5.1 system, this Philips is a neat proposition. Easy to install and with a heavyweight sound.

★★★★★

**Q Acoustics Media 4, £400**

A no-nonsense offering from the speaker specialist, which ignores HDMI inputs and daft DSP modes in favour of creating a nuanced and impressively solid 2.1 soundscape. Punchy, controlled and well-built.

★★★★★

TOP 5 SYSTEMS

**Panasonic SC-BTT505, £600**

Two-way driver arrangements in these grown-up looking speakers (plus a dizzying range of features) make this a great purchase. Big, dynamic sound, with strong dialogue

★★★★★

**Samsung HT-H7750WM, £850**

The top-flight system from Samsung in 2014 uses tallboy speakers all around. Plenty of features here, and a fulsome 5.1 performance, but the build quality is a bit disappointing

★★★★★

**Harman/Kardon BDS470, £650**

Harman's 2.1 system eschews 'net TV and streaming features, but majors in heavyweight build quality and solid AV performance. We tested a 2.1 iteration – 5.1 is also available

★★★★★

**LG BH8220B, £650**

With its silver finish, this is a suitable one-box system to partner with LG's flatscreen TVs, with a commendable, if slightly lacking in HF finesse, sound. Additional features including CD-ripping to USB. Handy

★★★★★

**Panasonic SC-HTB570, £350**

A commendable slim-line 2.1 system that can also be clicked together to make a soundbar. The punchy wireless subwoofer does a lot of the work. Bluetooth music streaming is onboard

★★★★★

HOME CINEMA

Choice

→ IN THE NEXT ISSUE

New tech for 2015: We report on all the biggest products and trends from the CES show
Eureka moment! The independent label that's flying the flag for classic films on BD
Tidal Hi-Fi: Is this a Spotify killer?

→ ON TEST

Panasonic TX-55AX902 4K TV Optoma HD151X DLP projector Arcam FMJ UDP411 Blu-ray player EE TV PVR Sony KD-65S9005B curved TV Philips HTL5140 soundbar **Multiroom speaker group test**
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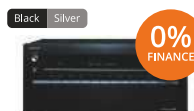
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POINT OF VIEW

Firmware updates can radically revamp a product's feature set in the blink of an eye.

Richard Stevenson wonders if that's good news for the AV industry

DEATH BY FIRMWARE update is getting to be a very real occupational hazard. Not just for me, but the AV receiver industry as a whole. You see, I have just finished reviewing the awesome Denon AVR-X5200W (see page 40) and during the four-week period on test it changed quite dramatically. Twice. Thanks to three major firmware updates and one feature add-on, the product that left the Stevenson Ranch might as well have had a different model number to the one that arrived.

Fresh out of the box, the first firmware update ensured it had Atmos enabled, albeit assuming you had proper in-ceiling speakers. Setup for Atmos up-firing speakers had to be fudged. A week or so later and the fascia tells me another firmware update is available. Bam! The X5200 now has the ability to select and measure up-firing speakers in the GUI. That is quite a fundamental shift, considering it is estimated (by me) that 97.5% of DIY Atmos home cinemas will use up-firing models.

A week later and the AVR-X5200W has been reviewed and the copy is written... when another little notification pops up on the display. This time it's an update for the Auro-3D feature. Not only does this involve obtaining complex codes and serial numbers from the unit, registering online and paying €149 for the Auro-3D licence, it also needs extra speakers. And cabling. And wall brackets. **All thanks to Auro-3D height speakers being in a completely different place to Atmos ones.** Delete the review and start again.

So I started to wonder: thanks to firmware updates (and ignoring the elephant in the room that is HDCP 2.2), are we reaching the point where you'll never need to buy a new AVR again? Current CPU/firmware architecture means all sorts of sound and video fettling duties could be added. Given the

computing power now sitting in your toaster, let alone an AVR, do you need to upgrade the hardware at all if it isn't broke? That is the question I asked Denon with regard to my aged £6,500 AVP-A1HD processor, realising it is bereft of 4K, Atmos or Auro-3D. Um, said Denon, there are no plans to upgrade the AVP-A1HD.

For hardware companies the home cinema gravy train has become something of a miniature model railway in recent years, so their lifeblood must remain new hardware sales. Keeping one old AVR bang up-to-date with firmware upgrades, for a decade or longer, simply doesn't make economic sense. Yet the fast and furious world of consumer electronics means feature development through firmware updates is essential for a brand to offer any sort of product longevity at all.

Shouting 'Lager, lager, lager!'

So the question is, at what point do you simply say, 'Okay, just keep the firmware coming and I won't buy a new product until my old one keels over, gets smashed or ends up in a pint of lager?' (which is what has happened to my iPhone 6 at Christmas, unfortunately). For AVRs the problem is compounded by excellent reliability, the inherent resistance to accidental damage of a metal box and their complete inability to fit into a pint glass.

Moreover, now that 3D, 4K and 11.1-channel sound are established as must-have features on top-flight AVRs, I can't think of any new AV technologies on the horizon that would require completely new hardware. I suspect DTS-MDA will be a simple firmware update for most Atmos-spec models. New AVR sir? Er, no thanks, I don't need it ■

Ever dropped a phone in a pint of lager? Or a TV on your foot? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

We're still waiting for the firmware update that will enable **Richard Stevenson** to supply this column with all the words in the correct order





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